

A romantic scene featuring a couple embracing on a balcony. The woman, with long blonde hair, is in the foreground, wearing a black strap over her shoulder. The man is behind her, his face partially visible. In the background, the Golden Gate Bridge is illuminated at night, with city lights visible in the distance.

# HIS HEARTH

MARY CALMES

His Hearth | *Mary Calmes*

I

IT WAS supposed to be my night. Well, maybe my and my best friend's night, but definitely I was in there somewhere.

When the stars aligned and you got your dream, nothing was supposed to get messed up. But since there was no such thing as perfect, I shouldn't have counted on it.

"Julian," she said before her arms wrapped around my neck. "Honey, where's Channing?"

Here was the crux of the matter. I turned on the barstool and looked at my best friend's wife. Phoebe Vega was a stunning creature, and waiting expectantly, breathless from dancing, her pale jade eyes focused on me, she was as close to a goddess as I would ever see.

"God, you're beautiful," I sighed.

The scowl came fast. "What's wrong?"

"I can't just give you a compliment?"

"No."

I couldn't contain my grin; it was just too stupid to even have to explain. "I need a drink."

"Oh no, what happened?"

This is the problem with having good friends; they know you well enough to interpret your mood from the expression on your face with simply a look.

"Jules, where's your date?" she demanded, her voice rising.

I emptied the shot of Patron in front of me, refocused my vision since it was the third one I'd had, and looked at her.

“Having sex with Peyton Wilson in his office.”

She was silent, stood there just looking at me for several moments, blinking, absorbing what I had said. “I’m sorry, what?”

I cleared my throat. “My date, the guy I’ve been going out with for the last six weeks, well, the last time I saw him, he was taking care of Peyton Wilson in the production office.”

And I could have been much more graphic, even more crass, but this was my girl, the wife of my best friend, and she was seven months pregnant. I didn’t want to upset her any more than I had to. So I just took in her sweet face.

There was a long pause. Maybe we were having a moment of silence to grieve.

“Ohmygod!” she shrieked, startling people around us, her voice high and shrill. “Are you kidding me?”

“Oh.” I nearly choked on my beer, trying not to laugh.

“We’re doing loud.”

“This isn’t funny!”

I really had way too much alcohol in me for it not to be funny. My date giving another guy a blowjob when he was supposed to be with me when the CEO of the company came to offer me his congratulations on my promotion... *oh hell yeah, it was funny!* And yes, it was more funny sad than funny ha-ha, but still... funny.

“Julian Nash, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Twenty minutes ago, Channing was on his knees in the—”

“Ohmygod!”

“Sorry.”

She swatted me hard. “Not you. Ohmygod! *Channing*, ohmygod!”

“Oh,” I grunted before lifting my glasses, settling them on top of my head for a moment as I rubbed my eyes.

“Julian!”

She was upset enough for both of us.

“Ohmygod!”

“Can you stop saying that?” I chuckled, rubbing the bridge of my nose before putting the rimless glasses back on, settling them comfortably on my face. They were my favorite pair and made me look much smarter than I was in real life.

“What’d you... how’d you...?” Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. “Julian, for fuck’s sake, what did you do?”

I shrugged. “It seemed rude to interrupt.”

“Julian!”

The woman was pregnant and scary hormonal, and as a result, she was much more emotional than I was. I was pragmatic because it made sense. Channing Isner had obviously needed to have sex, and Peyton Wilson was the hottest guy, correction, hottest *gay* guy, in our office after himself. Cash—Carlos Vega, my best friend and Phoebe’s husband—was hotter than both of them, but the man was married and straight, so he really didn’t count when Channing was looking to get laid.

“It’s okay, Phoeb,” I soothed her.

“No, it’s not!” she snarled at me, picking up one of the empty shot glasses in front of me as I lifted my finger to order another. “How many of these have you had?”

“Only three.”

“Ohmygod,” she said yet again, yanking on my arm until I slid off the barstool, tugging me after her through the crowd. I was dragged across the floor to where Cash stood in a group of people. When he saw me, his brows furrowed instantly.

I put up a hand to calm him. “I’m fine.”

He excused himself from those around him, grabbed hold of my bicep, and gave my arm a solid yank to get me moving. When we were out of earshot, he spun me around to face him. Normally, when I wasn’t buzzed, it would have been impossible for him to manhandle me, as we were close to the same height and build, but as I was a little out of it, he had the leverage.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

“Nothing. Everything’s fine,” I soothed him. “When are we eating? Your wife’s starving.”

“I’m not starving,” Phoebe chimed in, coming up beside him, rubbing her seven-months pregnant stomach. “I’m not always starving, you know.”

“Jules,” Cash snapped at me. “What the hell’s going on?”

“He’s got no date,” his wife answered for me.

Cash squinted at me. “What are you talking about? Isn’t Isner coming?”

So I explained to him how I had gone to Channing’s office early to pick him up and passed by the production office on the way.

“Wait now,” Cash said, staring at me, “you’re telling me that your boyfriend and one of my account reps were having sex in the production room?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I corrected him.

“They were dating,” Phoebe insisted, glaring at her husband, daring him to contradict her, “but he wasn’t Julian’s boyfriend. No boyfriend of Julian’s would ever cheat on him.”

I tipped my head to Phoebe. “Hopefully.”

She scolded my lack of faith. “Julian Nash!”

“Are you kidding?” Cash half-yelled.

What would be the purpose of that? “No, I’m not kidding. Why would I be kidding?”

“Did you kick his ass?”

I shot him a look.

“You want me to do it?”

“Who are you gonna beat up? Channing or Peyton?”

“Both of them,” he said, and I heard the irritation in his voice. “Goddamn it, Jules, this is why I told you to never shit where you eat. Now how in the hell are you supposed to be able to work with either of those fucks?”

“Easily,” I assured him. “I promise there won’t be any weirdness from me.”

“Shit.”

“It’s fine. I promise you.”

“God, you’re so calm,” Phoebe growled. “I say we go bitch slap Channing ’til he cries.”

We both looked at her.

“What?”

I grabbed her and hugged her tight. “It’s okay, love. Just lemme get another drink, and I’ll meet you guys back there in the big room.”

“Aww, Jules,” she sighed deeply. “What a way to celebrate your big night.”

And that was the part that stunk. It was the culmination of five years of work, and I had wanted to share that with someone special.

We had both just been promoted, my partner and I, Cash to marketing director, and me to creative director of our division. It was a huge step up the corporate ladder, especially since at twenty-eight and twenty-nine respectively, we were the youngest division heads in the company. In celebration of the promotion, our CEO had made a special trip out to congratulate us. Kelly Davis, who had made the decision to reward us based on the revenue our office generated and the quality of our ideas, had told Cash on a phone conference the week before that he was really looking forward to talking in person. Video conferences and phone conversations aside, he wanted to shake our hands and meet us face to face. It was very flattering, as the man seemed to be taking a special interest in both of our careers. He was also looking forward to meeting the people we shared our lives with. It was probably lucky that Channing had decided to show me what my true value was to him so early on. I would have hated to have my heart involved along with my pride. As it was, I would survive this blow to my ego. The timing was the only horror.

“He doesn’t know what he’s missing,” Phoebe said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh yeah?” I sighed, meeting her loving gaze. She was crazy about me, and it was there in her soft expression.

She took a quick breath. “Yeah. You have the best heart, you never take yourself too seriously, and you always, always keep your word.”

“Aww, sweetie,” I teased her.

Cash squeezed his wife playfully. “Quit, honey, you’ll make the boy blush.”

I grinned at her.

“Mmmm, gotta love that smile,” she sighed. “You’ve got that down pat.”

“Stop flirting with my partner,” Cash scolded her, and then he looked at me. “Go get a drink and meet us at the table. I’ll save you a seat.”

As I turned back toward the bar, I had to wonder about my judgment.

I had thought that Channing Isner and I were getting along great. After six weeks of talking and laughing, listening to jazz in the park, and driving to Napa, things seemed like they were going well. We’d had a few dinners during the week and long phone conversations where he shared the pitfalls of his day working as a junior media buyer at our firm. How had we gone from a progressing romance to him having sex in the production office with someone else? What had I missed?

“Jules.”

I looked over my shoulder at Cash.

“Hurry up!”

The man lived to order me around. I was still chuckling when I reached the bar. I was waiting for my drink when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Turning, I was stunned to find my date—my ex-date, the guy I had thought was going to be my date, the guy who had just been sweating and panting with somebody else—standing in front of me. It was surreal.

“Julian, where were you? You were supposed to pick me up at my office, and we were gonna take a cab over here together.”

I just stared at him. Seriously, the balls on the man...

Christ.

“I looked everywhere for you.”

But I had not been down Peyton Wilson’s pants, so what was he doing looking for me there? The thought, because I have an overactive sense of the ridiculous, made me stifle a laugh.

“Julian?”

He was standing there, lying to my face, and it was hard to wrap my brain around it.

“Are you alright?”

I leaned around him to grab yet another shot of Patron and the bottle of Corona the bartender had just put down for me.

“Jules?” he said, his voice rising.

I threw back the shot before taking a long swallow of beer. If he had not barred my path when I moved, I would have walked away. As it was, he cornered me.

“Julian? What’s going on?” he asked fast, worried suddenly, his hand flat on my chest.

“Move your hand,” I ordered, turning to face him, my voice hollow and cold.

“Why? Why can’t I touch you all of a sudden?” He sounded scared.

I took a deep breath. “I saw you in the office with Peyton.”

The bright blue eyes that I had found so lovely got huge and round.  
“What?”

I took another long swallow of my beer.

“Julian?”

Looking at him, I realized that he was trembling. “Just go home, Chan, or go meet Peyton, or do whatever the hell you want... I don’t care.”

“Are you kidding?” he asked breathlessly.

*Why did everyone keep asking me that?*

“Who told you I was in the office with Peyton? Was it Cash?”

I squinted at him. “No one told me, Chan. I saw you myself.”

“Jules, I need to explain.”

“No, don’t, just... go. We don’t hafta have a whole big blowout. We weren’t together long enough. You can just walk away, so g’head.”

“I don’t wanna walk away.”

“Fine, then I will,” I said, slipping by him.

Before I could take more than a step, he was back in front of me, his angelic face suddenly a mess, like I had hurt him.

“It’s all your fault, you know. What kind of man doesn’t have sex?”

Of course it was my fault; why wouldn’t it be? The blame just came faster than I thought it would.

“Julian? Tell me, explain it to me.”

“I did,” I assured him.

“Do it again. Why didn’t you have sex with me?” His voice was sharp, attacking.

Heavy sigh. “Because I wanted to have more of a connection than just a physical one,” I told him. “And for the record, I thought you enjoyed the time we spent together.”

“I did,” he gasped out. “But being around you and not having sex is... because the way you kiss should be followed by fucking. You’re the biggest goddamn cocktease I’ve ever met.”

“Okay,” I said flatly, putting the half-empty beer on the bar before brushing by him to go join my friends for dinner.

“Julian!” he almost screamed. I would have kept walking, but I was afraid his volume would only increase. I had been humiliated once already. I was not ready for a second go-round. Pivoting, I was surprised that he was right there in front of me.

“I’m sorry, all right? Just forgive me already.”

Already? The whole mess was not even an hour old. And furthermore, I had no idea what was with the tortured look on his face. I wasn’t the one who had ended close to a two-month-long relationship on my knees in the production office.

“You’re not actually going to say no to me, are you?”

The reasoning was there in his voice. He was young and hot and was I crazy to even be thinking about calling it quits with him. Who the hell did I think I was?

“Julian?”

“I’ll see you at work,” I said, stepping around him, making clear the new parameters of our relationship.

He stepped into my path, hands on my sweater, fisted there, holding on. “God, Jules, just... don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?”

We both turned to look at the man standing beside us.

It took me only a second to process who I was looking at.

“Ryan Dean,” Channing breathed the name out quicker than I could. “Holy shit.”

Everyone always reacted that way, and I understood why.

Ryan Dean was a household name in the bay area. His show, *Ryan's Rundown*, was on Channel 5 and came on every night right after the local news. He had been approached to take it national, to have it make the next big splash on Bravo, but as far as I knew, he had not signed a contract to make that jump to cable. At least, he had made no announcement on his show. And I would have known because I never missed watching him if I was home. It was pure pleasure just looking at him. The man was drop-dead, stop-traffic, catch-your-breath gorgeous. I, with everyone else, understood how he had made a pile of money modeling.

He used to be huge. Magazine editorials, runways all over the world, high-profile advertising campaigns—he was the guy the big fashion houses called, the one who made booking agents lose their minds. He had worked for all the big names: Valentino, Hugo Boss, Dior, Hermès, Calvin Klein, Gucci, Prada, Versace, and so many more. Even though his name was elusive, his face, body, rippling abs, and golden skin were ingrained forever in your mind.

“Hey,” I said, my voice low, husky. “How’re you?”

I was given an appraising look. “I’m good, Mr. Nash,” he said softly, his voice low, seductive, the grin hinting at evil before he turned to look at Channing. “You’re standing in my spot.”

Channing moved fast, stepping away from me so that Ryan could take his place.

“Thanks,” he said before he took hold of the hem of my sweater. “You can go.”

When Ryan Dean dismissed you, you went, and Channing Isner was no exception. The man was far too beautiful to disobey.

“That was mean.” I chuckled, looking at him, unable to see anything or anyone else. Dressed as he was, the man could have walked off the cover of a magazine. In his black boot-cut jeans and a short-sleeved lime green shirt that pulled tight across his chiseled chest and biceps, he looked like he was ready to be the center of attention at a photo shoot.

“Like I care.” He shrugged. “And if you cared, you would have said something. It’s one of the many reasons I enjoy working with you. You’re never afraid to tell me anything, even if it’s to go to hell.”

“I’ve never told you to go to hell.”

“No.” The look on his face made me feel like prey. “But you could.”

We had worked together many times over the past two years as my company, Miller Freedman, did all of his publicity work. And just like everyone who had ever met the man, I had been mesmerized.

Whatever word you wanted to use wasn’t enough. He was more. Ryan Dean was a little over six feet, with blond hair that was always artfully messy. It was thick, streaked bronze and wheat, and fell down the nape of his neck to his shoulders. He had hazel eyes that changed color constantly, and his skin, which he showed off quite a bit of at any opportunity, was smooth golden perfection. He had a lean, sculpted, muscular physique and moved fluidly like a dancer, with a walk that was more strut than anything else.

The man was, without a doubt, a walking, talking wet dream come to life. The blond stubble of his beard, tawny mane of hair, long golden lashes, and thick dark brows: you just *thought* sex when you saw him. I understood how he had made an incredible living as a model, but even more alluring than that, to me, was the man’s attitude.

During the times we had worked together on the publicity for his reality show, Ryan had made every day fun.

One of my favorite times with him had been a charity event for the homeless. It had been a huge party, very exclusive and wildly successful, raised a ton of money, and he had shown his happiness with how everything turned out by inviting everyone who worked on the event to attend it as well. I had watched him hold court, seen all the gorgeous men who trailed after him, and felt thoroughly intimidated. I had left early; there was no way to compete with other models for his attention.

*Ryan's Rundown* had been on the air for three years and was about all the things you could do in San Francisco with your partner to keep the zing in your relationship, from attending cooking classes together to having a picnic at the beach to getting dressed up and hitting the town for a night of dancing. It was fun to watch, and he never took himself too seriously. His audience was as addicted to his personality as they were to his face. People, especially men, threw themselves in his path wherever he went. His conquests were legendary, his sexual appetite consuming. I never stood a chance of capturing his interest, but it was always flattering that whenever he saw me, he remembered my name.

"How are you?" he asked, stepping closer to me, his head tilting back just a bit to look into my face. As I was six-three to his six feet, he had to look up at me just a little.

"I've been better," I sighed, taking in the sensuous lips, how full and dark they were.

"Why? What's wrong?"

I realized I was staring and stopped, looked away, but then had to look back or be rude. His eyes were so beautiful, the different colors in them, flecked with gold and copper, the brown, gray, and an ever-changing green, that sometimes caught the light and almost glowed. Funny that Ryan Dean never failed to bring out the poet in me.

"Nothing. How've you been? I saw you on a lot of stuff, lots of guest appearances, and you did one of your shows from New York during Fashion Week, very cool."

"Yeah, that's great," he said dismissively, his gaze not moving from mine. "But I was doing too much and the show took me away from home. I don't want that."

"Why not? Don't you want your show to get picked up by a network?"

"No."

“No?”

He gave me a wicked arch of eyebrow. “You sound surprised.”

“’Cause I am. Why don’t you want a syndicated television show?”

“Just don’t.”

“Why?” I pressed him.

“It’s not my dream.”

“But you could be a household name.”

“No thanks.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Not to you,” he said. “I need my show to be just big enough to keep me and my crew employed, help the station, still be current, and actually provide a public service. Any more than that is excessive.”

He could conquer the world if he wanted. Wasn’t that what he wanted?

“There are things I hope to get a chance to have.”

“Oh.” I didn’t want to pry. “Okay so—”

“But none of that matters tonight,” he said, and I watched him bite his bottom lip. I wondered if he even realized he’d done it. “Why didn’t you call me?”

It took me a second. “I’m sorry?”

“You were supposed to call me.”

“When? We finished all the work for your—”

“No,” he cut me off, placing a hand over my heart. “I told *you* to call me.”

I tried to think back to the last time I had seen him. We had wrapped the spring campaign for his show, and then there was the press release and the launch... what was I missing? “Wait. Why would you have needed to talk to me?”

“You really have no idea, do you?”

“No.” I racked my inebriated brain. “The only reason for me to call would have been if something went wrong, and as far as I know that event went off flaw—”

“Something getting messed up was not the only reason to call,” he assured me, and I saw him swallow hard, saw the muscles in his jaw clench.

“Yeah, but—”

“You didn’t even show up to my spring cotillion fundraiser, the one you planned.”

I raked my fingers through my hair. “Yeah, well, it turned out that my friend Melina had her baby that night, and I was her coach.”

He nodded. “Well then, I guess I’ll forgive you.”

“Thanks,” I said, my mouth dry, my voice failing me. I could feel the heat radiating off the man as he stepped even closer, his thigh brushing mine, his breath ghosting over my face.

“You’re a hard man to get ahold of. Every time I call your office, your assistant tells me you’re busy. You never answer your cell, and apparently, my e-mails are going to the wrong guy.”

Note to self: kill Conner. My assistant had turned away Ryan Dean? Was he high? “I had no idea you were trying to get ahold of me.”

“Well, now that we’ve got everything cleared up, how

’bout I drive you back to my place and make you some dinner?”

I squinted at him from behind my glasses. "I'm actually here for dinner."

"Oh? With who? Not the guy I just got rid of?"

"He was supposed to be my date."

"Supposed to be?"

"Yeah," I sighed, "I found him at work giving another guy a blowjob."

Unlike both of my friends who had been livid, his snort of laughter was instant.

"It's not funny," I scolded him.

His low chuckle filled me with warmth. "No?"

"Hell no," I said with no conviction whatsoever.

One gold eyebrow arched as he studied me.

I shrugged. "Anyway, it's my fault, I guess. I must not be all that interesting."

"It's not you, Mr. Nash," he promised me.

"What're you doing here?" I ignored the compliment, looking around for the people who normally trailed after him.

The man was never alone.

"I came by myself."

"You sure? You can tell me if you're on a date. I promise not to leak it to the tabloids," I teased him.

"I don't date."

"Why not?"

“Everybody bores me.”

I chuckled softly. “I see.”

“Except you, Julian Nash. You don’t bore me one bit.”

He was trying to give me a heart attack. “How’dya know?”

We’ve never been on a date.”

“And I’d like to remedy that, so... come home with me.”

“How is that a date?”

“I dunno. I don’t care. Just come home with me.”

I sighed deeply. “God, I wish I could.”

“Why can’t you? Just blow off your dinner.”

But I couldn’t, and when I explained who the dinner was with, his face lit up so fast that I could barely breathe. He was a vision of heat and sex, and the way he looked at me with his narrowed cat eyes was enough to turn me into a human torch. The man was trying to kill me by lavishing me with all his attention.

“I have an idea.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I’ll be your date for dinner. Then afterwards you have to come home with me.”

“Are you serious?” I squinted at him.

“Very.”

“Well, as nice as that offer is, you don’t have—”

“I’m not placating you; my motives are completely selfish, I assure you. I’ve waited more than long enough.”

I didn’t believe him for a second. He was taking pity on me because I must have looked like hell. “You know I appreciate what—”

“Oh.” His voice rose. “Was that guy going as your friend or your—”

My laughter cut him off. “Everybody at work knows I’m gay, if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t keep secrets.”

“Well, okay then, you have no reason to turn me down.”

And he was right, I didn’t. “Okay, Dean, you’re on. What am I, stupid?”

“Should I answer?” His eyes glittered, wicked with humor. “‘Cause you didn’t call me.”

I grunted, taking his hand and leading him through the crowd toward the back. When he stopped suddenly, I looked over my shoulder at him. “What? Changed your mind already?”

He shook his head. “No, I just....” He lifted our joined hands. “This is nice. Nobody ever just holds my hand.”

“Why?”

“I usually just fuck,” he said matter-of-factly.

I nodded, smiling. “Well, can I hold your hand first?”

“Smartass,” he muttered. I tightened my hold on him and tugged him after me.

AS SOON as we walked into the private back room, all eyes were on Ryan and me, and I felt a flush of pride that not only was there a smart, funny, and gorgeous man with me but more importantly, one who was apparently kind of into me.

No matter what happened, Ryan Dean was there with me and my best friend and my best friend's wife on one of the most important nights of my life. I would remember it always.

The best part of the evening for me was that our big dinner was taking place at a high-end steakhouse, but with all of us in casual clothes. Suits and ties would not have been us. Me in jeans and a sweater, Cash in corduroys and wingtips, his wife in downplayed elegance—that was us.

Given the level of casualness Cash and I had requested, I was surprised by how many people had turned out to join us for dinner. I felt slightly uncomfortable at being the center of attention and so made a beeline for my boss, Miles Teruya, the managing director of the San Francisco office. After he shook my hand and squeezed my shoulder, he told Ryan how good it was to see him again.

Miles remembered my date just as well as any of the rest of us. Before I could say another word, my boss turned to speak to Mr. Davis, drawing his attention.

The owner and CEO of the company I worked for rose from his chair and offered me his hand, just like it happened every day. “Such a pleasure,” the man addressed me kindly.

I felt the sincerity rolling off him. “Mr. Davis, this is Ryan Dean.”

He held out his hand instantly, no hesitation, not a second of lag time. “Pleasure, Ryan.”

“And you, sir.”

“Julian, I'd like you to meet Brian Santos, our new head of strategic marketing in New York.” I extended my hand to the man. “And this is Ryan Dean. Ryan, Brian Santos.”

“Hey.” Ryan shook his hand as well.

“Please sit. Let's get you two something to drink,” Mr.

Davis said quickly.

I looked over at Cash, saw him waggle his eyebrows at me. The delight on Phoebe's face was transparent, and I watched Ryan respond to the siren call which was my best friend's wife. She was too adorable to resist. He went around the table fast. Cash watched his wife rise to offer her hand to my date.

"It's so nice that you could join us," she gushed. "I never miss your show."

"Thank you." He reached out to touch her cheek. "God, now I get the whole glowing pregnant woman thing, huh?"

She sighed deeply, staring at him. "I knew you'd be a dream in person."

His eyes glittered, and I saw her melt right there. "And may I say that Cash is a very lucky man to have a goddess on his arm," Ryan told her.

I glanced at Cash, and he looked at me. Both of us were waiting for her to laugh or tell him he was full of shit or smack him or something. Certainly she wouldn't let him get away with such a cheesy line.

"Oh," she purred as she reached for him. "Aren't you wonderful?"

I looked at Cash, and he mouthed the word "hormones" at me.

Their hands were a tangle as they started talking almost frantically. She wanted to know everything about him, down to the smallest detail. He wanted the same from her. You would have thought they were twins separated at birth.

We ate, drank, and talked. Ryan had sparkling cider with Phoebe, which I found charming. Cash was surprised that Ryan was an avid soccer player; Ryan couldn't believe Cash had been to Graceland nine times. We laughed and laughed and Ryan bet Phoebe five dollars she wouldn't drink the little shot glass of dressing that came with her salad. She had to drink it with a straw. He ordered her more after she did, and he paid up.

Mr. Davis watched us all with the most amused expression on his face. When someone tried to bring up work, he ignored them until they quit pressing the issue. He just wanted to visit; business could be done anytime.

Laughing was for the moment.

Halfway through dinner, I leaned in close and told Ryan how much I appreciated him being there. I noticed the tremor that ran through him as I lifted my lips from the hairsbreadth they were from his ear.

“No thanks needed,” he whispered back, his eyes absorbing my face as his hand moved under the table, fingers lacing with mine. “I’m having a great time. Your friends are amazing.”

“How so?”

“They actually want the best for you. Cash and you work at the same place, but he’s not jealous of you at all.”

He’s my best friend and my partner; he’s the one watching my back.”

“And he actually will,” he said like it was weird. “You can count on him.”

“Do you have people in your life you trust?”

“For some things,” he answered vaguely, “not all.”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

He caught his breath. “That’s okay,” he got out, “and you just called me baby.”

I’d gotten familiar way too fast. It always happened when I liked someone. “Crap. I’m sor—”

“Don’t be,” he cut me off, tightening his fingers that were entwined with mine so I couldn’t pull my hand away.

“You wanna talk like I belong to you... it’s fine with me.”

*Which was a dangerous statement to make.*

“Julian?” He was studying my face. “Are you okay?”

“I dunno.”

He bumped me with his shoulder and gave his attention back to Phoebe. I realized that I wanted his eyes back on me.

The fact that he had not let go of my hand, forcing me to eat with my left, filled my stomach with butterflies. When was the last time I had felt like this?

“Oh, look,” Christine Abrams, one of the account managers from New York, gasped across from me. “That’s Kevin Winters. He just closed that deal with the military to build the circuitry for something or other.”

“That’s right,” Brian said slowly to anyone who was listening. “Did you see in *Forbes*, they’re calling him the sixty-million dollar man?” It seemed to be a rhetorical question because he didn’t wait for an answer. “His business would be nice.”

“Yes, it would,” Christine said flatly.

“We already have it,” Miles assured her and Brian.

“Cash and Julian did all the PR for his first merger with Ramsey Software.”

“Really?” Brian commented. “Well, that’s excellent.

Cash, please invite the man over.”

“Not me,” he said, leaning over his wife and slapping my leg hard. “He doesn’t know me. Stand up, Julie, so he can see ya.”

I suggested that maybe Mr. Winters was busy and shouldn’t be interrupted, but Brian was insistent. I stood up and walked around the table at the same time Mr. Winters glanced around the room. His face brightened when he saw me, and he immediately started across the floor.

“Oh shit,” Brian breathed, clearly surprised at his own reaction as well as the fact that the man actually knew me.

The way he looked up at me was funny.

Kevin Winters was in a Hugo Boss suit that looked great on him, the cut showing off his wide shoulders and narrow waist. I noticed what always struck me about him, the way the man seemed so comfortable in his own skin.

“Hey,” he called over.

I tipped my head at him as he walked up to me, hand held out.

“How the hell are you?” I asked as he grabbed my hand and put his other on my shoulder.

“I’m doing really well, haven’t you read the news?”

“I see your wardrobe is improving.” I teased him.

His face showed his ease in my company. “Yeah, whatever—don’t hate the player, hate the game.”

Tall and muscular, he wasn’t what most people had in their mind as a stereotypical software developer. He had told me that because he was African-American, still, sometimes he ran into prejudice. I hadn’t believed him, and he had given me a funny look. We’d had a long conversation about human nature. I enjoyed his company and the fact that he was very bright. It was nice when someone could follow your train of thought.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, looking over all the people at the table. “Looks like you’re celebrating something.”

“We are. Cash and I just got promoted, and our CEO Kelly Davis is here. Lemme introduce you to everyone.”

He reached out and put a hand back on my shoulder.

“You’re not leaving are you? I mean, now that you’re moving up the food chain, you’re not going to be relocated or something?”

“No.”

“And you and Cash will still handle my events personally?”

“Of course. We’re not—”

“Oh hey, Cash!” Mr. Winters walked around the others to hold out a hand to my best friend who stood and shook it.

“Good to see you.”

“And you.” Cash’s voice was warm, and I knew he was pleased that Kevin was genuinely happy to see him.

Mr. Winters turned back to look at me. “So tell me, what now?”

I introduced him to Mr. Davis and Brian Santos, walked him around the table to Miles, and then had him shake hands with all the sales reps, including Christine Abrams.

Finally, I walked him around the table to meet Phoebe and Ryan. He was really pleased to meet both of them, praising Cash to his wife and me to my date. It was nice of him and let me know how much he really valued me and my partner.

“You’re very lucky to have Julian and Cash,” he told Mr. Davis after turning his attention from Ryan “They’re really good. Nobody else had a clue what to do with my account when I was shopping for a PR firm. And even at your place it didn’t look good until I met your boys here. All those people flew in from New York, and it was such a waste since the winning idea was right here the whole time.”

“The Moxie campaign was phenomenal,” Mr. Davis told Cash and me, “but the product demanded it,” he finished, looking at Mr. Winters. “We could do no less for you.”

It had been a big campaign. Not the largest in Miller Freedman history, but it was up there in the top ten.

*We had been cornered, Cash and I, on the way out of a meeting that a hundred people had attended. Mr. Winters had sat through presentation after presentation, clearly bored out of his mind, committing to nothing, and on a whim, called out to us as we exited the huge amphitheater-style meeting room.*

*“What do you two think?”*

*I just looked at him, and Cash did his patented squint.*

*“Nothing, huh?” he teased us, chuckling, ready to dismiss us with the rest, making his way to the door. “Big surprise.”*

*“Actually, we do have this one thought.” I took a breath, smiling wide.*

*He stopped and took the sketch pad I handed him, the one I had been doodling in for the past two hours. Cash and I had passed it back and forth while everyone was talking earlier, droning on and on about the software that Mr.*

*Winters’s company manufactured.*

*“We,” I indicated my partner and I, “heard you say over and over that the software you were launching would presume to know what was best for all the inventory needs of your clients.”*

*“And that made us think,” Cash chimed in, “maybe the software was like a wise guy and would have the guts to tell you sometimes what you wouldn’t want to hear. So then we were thinking, what’s a nice way to say smartass?”*

*Kevin Winters, who was no longer trying to leave, seemed to have stopped breathing. He had basically frozen where he stood and was staring at us. I was vaguely aware that the room had gone quiet around us.*

*“So we thought, ‘moxie’,” I explained.*

*The CEO looked away from me, at someone else, and then returned his gaze to me.*

*“Moxie, right.” Cash’s resonant voice drew Mr. Winters’s attention from me, “like ‘that kid’s got moxie, lotta balls’. So we thought,” he said, pointing to my sketchpad in the software mogul’s hands, “that you make the word with a capital M at the beginning, put a fedora on it, and call the software ‘Moxie’. Moxie because it knows what’s right, and it’s gonna tell ya. Your business system’s got Moxie, kid.”*

*“You gotta have the Edward G. Robinson accent,” I added. “Very, ya know.” I cleared my throat. “Your inventory’s low, see?”*

*“That sucked,” Cash assured me.*

*“Yeah, but you were thinking Bogart.”*

*Cash grunted, nodding. “I was, yeah, but you’re right. It’s more Edward G. Robinson.”*

*Kevin Winters was staring open-mouthed at Cash.*

*“It’s simple and memorable,” I said as he turned his head slowly to look at me, “and you can have all kinds of fun with the commercials.” I wagged my eyebrows at him. “But it’s just a thought, since you asked and all.”*

*He nodded slowly, looked back and forth between me and Cash before he offered me his hand. “This is going to work, gentlemen.”*

*It had been the beginning of a very satisfying business partnership, one that had benefited Miller Freedman both financially and professionally.*

*“I appreciate your business, Mr. Winters,” Mr. Davis said, offering the software mogul his hand.*

*“I appreciate Julian and Cash, Mr. Davis,” Mr. Winters said to the CEO of our company before taking his hand. After a minute, he turned back to look at me. “So now what?”*

Everything's the same with you guys except new titles or whatever?"

"Yep, all the same," I told him, appreciating the fact that he wanted to make sure Cash and I weren't going anywhere.

"Good, because I need you. I need to throw a party for my shareholders, and I want you and your partner to make it happen."

"Of course," Cash assured him. "I can call—"

"I'll call you next week. I'll take you and Jules to Donatello's. I'm dying to see if the new lasagna is as good as everyone says."

"Sounds great," Cash agreed, offering the man his hand.

He gave Cash the guy clench and then walked me a few feet away from the table.

"So I'll call you," he said, "is the number the same?"

"Yeah," I answered.

Mr. Winters pulled his phone out of the breast pocket of his jacket. "And your cell number? That's still the same too?"

"Yep."

His eyes flicked to mine. "Then I've got that already."

"Good."

"Okay, I gotta go." He glanced around before looking back at me. "Unless you wanna come?"

"Oh no, I'm good here."

"You're sure?"

I nodded. "Yeah, thanks though."

“Okay, I’ll see ya. Later, Cash,” he called back to my partner.

“Later.”

I got the hard shoulder pat, and then he was gone.

Taking my seat beside Ryan, he leaned into me. I had no idea what I had done to deserve the familiar action, but I wasn’t about to question him.

“I don’t remember him being so hot,” Phoebe was saying. “He doesn’t look like that in the magazines... I would have remembered.”

Everyone laughed.

“What a compliment that was,” Ryan whispered, his hand sliding up my back to my shoulder. “That man really trusts you and your creativity.”

The attention combined with the sultry tone of his voice, the way his fingers sank into my hair, the pressure of him massaging the back of my head... all of it made me dizzy. I could get used to having the man around very fast if I wasn’t careful.

A half an hour later, Mr. Davis stood up from the table.

“All right, everyone, we need to call it a night before I have to call cabs for all of you. Monday morning we’ll all meet at nine sharp to go over the budget and the profit and loss statement from last year. I want to meet your team, the shining stars and the people we’re looking to develop. I want a deep bench, especially here, because with the numbers you’re both putting up, I feel that eventually, we will need to call you to New York.” Cash tried unsuccessfully to interrupt him. “Your results put you in a very exclusive club, Mr.

Vega. You and Mr. Nash are the future of this firm, and I plan to make it impossible for you to say no to me.” Neither one of us said a word. “We’ll go over everything on Monday.”

We both gave him the agreement he was looking for, the

*yes sir* of acknowledgement. Outside the restaurant, we all said our good-nights. Ryan and I walked Cash and Phoebe around back to the parking lot. Once they left, we were alone.

“So,” he said. “You ready to come home with me?”

I cleared my throat. “Ryan—”

“Thank you for introducing me to Kevin Winters. You didn’t have to.”

I squinted at him.

“Well you didn’t.” He shrugged.

“But you being here with me was a huge deal.”

“I know.” He cleared his throat. “You showed me. I’ve never been to a work function with anybody else. It means more than you know.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” He nodded and closed the rest of the distance between us, his hand reaching for me, his fingers sliding over my jaw then down to my throat. “And now I believe you need to come home with me.”

The way he said it, the exhale of breath, I felt my stomach knot.

“Please, Julian.”

“Why?” I asked sincerely, wanting to know.

“Because,” he said, his voice hoarse, wetting his lips, “I want to talk to you.”

And I realized as I stared into those gorgeous cat eyes of his that I desperately wanted to go home with him. His hands felt good on my skin, his breath was warm on my face, and he seemed content standing close to me. It was nice, and I was very flattered. But no good could come of me

wanting Ryan Dean. He wasn't serious, and I was nothing but. There was no way to win.

"What're you thinking?" he asked, staring up into my eyes before he reached for and took off my glasses. "Can you see without these?"

"Yes." I told him as he put them on top of his head. "You plan on keeping them?"

"I do like the style: very cool, the metal, the screws, very sleek and clean, but I dunno. Now tell me what you're thinking?"

"I'm thinking that you're way outta my league." I was honest. "You know you are."

"I think it's the other way around," he said, grabbing hold of the lapels of my pea coat, making sure I couldn't walk away from him.

God, he even smelled good.

"Come home with me."

"And do what?"

"Lemme make you dessert," he said gently. "Please, Jules."

How was I supposed to say no?

"Julian?"

I had not had sex with Channing Isner, and now Ryan Dean wanted *what*?

"Come home with me; I'll make you something amazing."

But what I hoped for and what he wanted had to be two completely different things. And I had a process that I went through: friend to lover, lover to boyfriend, boyfriend to partner. I didn't work any other way; I never had. "I'm not how you think I am," I told him.

“How do you know what I think?” he asked, his hands opening my coat and sliding over my abdomen. Just that much contact made my jaw clench.

“You know, I should probably just go home,” I barely got out as his hands slipped up under my sweater and T-shirt to touch bare skin.

“Oh yeah, I knew your body had to be something under your clothes, Mr. Nash.”

No one had touched me since my last boyfriend, Mitch Carmichael, and six months of celibacy was tough on the libido. At twenty-eight, I had just as healthy a sex drive as the next guy.

“You’re shaking.” I closed my eyes. His lips brushed over my throat. “Come home with me... please.”

The idea of casual sex was exciting, the reality simply not me. I took a deep breath, opened my eyes, untangled myself from him, and took a step back. “I can’t. I don’t just fuck for fun.”

“Who said anything about fucking?”

I arched an eyebrow, and his smile, which made his eyes sparkle, took my breath away. The man was truly the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in my life. I was in no way prepared to trade snappy banter with him.

“I know that’s not you,” Ryan breathed. “Is it, honey?”

Could he read my mind? And what was with calling me “honey”?

“You’re serious and smart, and you don’t go to bed unless you mean it,” he said, reaching out and slipping a finger through one of the belt loops of my pants, easing me close to him, his eyes never leaving mine. “Well, I mean it, too, so come home with me.”

“Ryan, I—”

“Just come with me,” he insisted, and I saw how serious he was. “And we’ll see if I can convince you that I’m serious too.”

He was messing with me, I thought, a second before he stepped forward and wedged his thigh against my groin.

Hand on the back of my neck, he pulled me close. I slowly parted my lips, and Ryan's mouth was on mine, his tongue darting inside, the kiss hard and urgent. His hands were on my face, making sure I didn't move. He had no idea about what kissing could be, how hot and consuming. I changed my stance, straightened, and decided to show him what he was missing. I tipped his head back, stilling him completely under my hands before I exhaled. He shivered just once before I sealed my lips down over his.

Being taller than he was, even by inches, gave me the leverage I needed. I slid my tongue over his, slowly, deliberately, tasting him, going deep, back and forth, stopping for just a heartbeat before starting again, drinking him down as he pressed himself to me. I kissed him as though he belonged to me, like all I had was time. I felt him tremble when my teeth touched his bottom lip, tugging gently, sucking it inside my mouth before I stepped back away from him.

The muscles in his jaw clenched tight, I had all of his attention. I stared at him as he looked back at me, his chest rising and falling, swallowing hard. One thing I knew: I was a world-class kisser. Sometimes, when I was really concentrating, moving slow, letting the heat build, being playful and dominant at the same time... sometimes, for my lovers, the kissing had been enough.

"Julian," he whispered, his hand lifting, coming to rest gently on my throat, stroking my skin as his eyes narrowed in that way they will before you go to bed. It was very sexy and the man himself irresistible. I leaned in, and he met me more than halfway. The second kiss was even better than the first.

His lips parted instantly as he submitted to me. I put my hands on his face, my mouth slanting over his, kissing him thoroughly, deeply, making sure I didn't miss anything: the bumpy roof of his mouth, his teeth, the inside of his cheeks and his tongue. I kissed him until I heard the sweet whimper I was after, the telltale sound of surrender. I felt his hands on my waist, his thighs against mine. I slid my tongue around his, letting him feel me move back and forth, the motion hinting at more. And I wanted more, because if it

felt this good just kissing him, the way his mouth fit mine, his uninhibited, sensual response, I could only imagine what he would be like in bed. I wanted to feel his bare skin under my hands, be buried inside of him.

I didn't want to stop, he tasted so good, but I made myself before I did something stupid and let myself touch him again. When I pulled back, he came with me for a second, leaning hard before he recovered and straightened up. His eyes were deep olive green, heavy lidded, and his lips were swollen. I found myself just standing there staring at him, unable, unwilling, to step away. I really wanted to take him up on his offer. I wanted to go home with him.

"How 'bout this?" he asked softly as he dragged in air.

"How 'bout we go next door to Dante's and have a drink."

I waited.

"And then," he said huskily, "when you're ready, you let me take you home."

He was being so accommodating, moving slow instead of attacking me. His reputation was that he moved fast: he slept with you and discarded you, usually in the same night.

I didn't want to be another notch in his bedpost; I wanted to mean more or never be anything at all.

"Okay?" He pressed me.

"You really think I'm gonna go home with you?" I was watching him intently, studying him, and so did not miss the sudden shiver, the quick constrict of his chest, or the pursing of his lips. The man looked nervous, and I was at a loss as to why.

"Oh yeah."

And the way he said it, so matter-of-fact, the way he was holding my gaze, none of it flirty just honest, was surprising.

He took my hand, his fingers sliding into mine. “Come on.”

The way he was touching me was nice, like he cared.

The way his eyes sought mine, the way he bit his lip, took a quick breath, it was all very telling. He wanted me to go with him. When he tugged gently on my hand, I followed after him.

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked gently.

“Nobody makes me nervous like this,” he confessed, releasing a quick breath even as he tightened his hand on mine.

INSIDE Dante’s, a Latin jazz club I liked, he pointed at an empty table toward the back, and I made my way toward it while he kept going toward the bar to get drinks. I was relaxing, waiting for him, my legs stretched out in front of me, when a guy walked up beside me. I watched as the man squatted down so he was at eye level with me.

“Hi.” I greeted him.

“Can I get you to come sit with me?”

“I’m actually here with someone,” I told him. Handsome man, older than me, brown eyes, beard, mustache, tall, broad-shouldered, he was the kind of guy I would have loved to talk to. I hadn’t been cruised in a long time. The timing was funny.

“I don’t see anybody.” He openly stared at me as he put his hand on my knee. It was funny; I could not even remember the last time anyone had approached me at a bar or anywhere else for that matter. I was not the kind of guy most men noticed. With brown-black hair, dark blue eyes, and glasses, it was easy to lose me in a crowd. My mother has always said that I had striking features, but from living in my own skin, I knew the truth. I was plain, and that was all. I was built long and lean, covered in muscle that came from being an athlete in high school and college, lots of swimming,

since I was eight that I still did daily. I ran and lifted weights, but my body was not the chiseled piece of art that Ryan Dean's was.

"He's right here," I said, tilting my head at Ryan as he closed in on me, reaching for the glass he held out once he was there. "But I appreciate the offer; it's very flattering."

"Oh," the guy said, getting up, looking down at me.

"Well, maybe after you're done here, you can—"

"He won't be done," Ryan interrupted, taking a seat in the chair beside me, his legs sliding under mine.

The guy nodded, gave me a last look, and left.

"Can't leave you alone for a second, huh?" Ryan said quickly, his smile forced. I could tell the difference between his real ones that fired his eyes and the fake ones that never made it there.

"Doesn't usually happen," I assured him as he leaned forward.

"Oh, I think it does. I think you just don't notice."

But I actually was a very observant man. For instance, I noticed everything about Ryan Dean. "Yeah?"

"Maybe you're just radiating happy right now."

"And why would I be doing that?"

He looked uncertain, almost floundering. "I dunno, what would be making you happy right now?"

There was no question that being around Ryan Dean probably made me glow.

His expression changed, grew thoughtful, like he was trying to figure me out.

“What?”

“You have no idea what you look like, do you?”

I knew exactly what I looked like, and me, any time, any day, would not have made any man stop and talk. I was the guy you got to know and then noticed. It never worked any other way. Men saw me after they knew me, not before.

“Hey.”

My eyes returned to his. As I had been lost in thought for a few moments, when my mind had drifted so had my focus. But Ryan wanted my attention and I would give it back to him.

“You’re not drinking.” He pointed at my glass. “I want you drinking.”

“Sorry,” I said, the response automatic, looking at his glass. “What is that?”

“Cranberry juice.”

“With what in it?” I asked, picking it up and tasting it.

“With nothing in it.”

And there wasn’t any alcohol at all. “Why?”

He just shrugged.

I took a sip of my scotch and water. “I shouldn’t drink anymore; I’m already not as clear-headed as I should be.”

“Drink up.”

I chuckled, and he waggled his eyebrows at me. He was very cute, and I was having trouble not just leaning forward and tasting him. The wicked look let me know he could read my mind. When some fans came over, claiming his attention, I was almost relieved.

A while later, as I was listening to the music, I realized suddenly how relaxed I was. That never happened when I was with somebody new. Usually, “anxious” was the word to describe me, because I was never really sure what to say or do. When I glanced at Ryan, I found him looking at me.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he sighed, “just content.”

Which was a scary word. There were a million casual words to use. “Content” was not one of them. “Content” was reserved for that peaceful feeling that comes with having everything you want. Maybe his definition was different from mine.

“Content?”

He leaned forward and patted my leg gently. “Yeah.” I got half a grin.

Nope. He and I had the same personal dictionary. He was happy right where he was, just like I was. It was scary as hell.

“You know, your eyes are amazing,” he said slowly. “I have never seen such dark blue eyes before.”

I stared at him.

“What?”

Most people assumed that my eyes were black. That Ryan Dean had looked long enough to tell that they were, in fact, blue was amazing. I had to tilt my head a certain way or the light had to catch them for anyone to see that they were midnight blue. He had to have really been studying me. The thought filled my stomach with butterflies.

“Julian?”

“Yours are too,” I said quickly, because the changing colors of brown, green, and gray were really something to see. The deep dark shade of clear olive they were at the moment was truly beautiful.

“They turn dark green when I’m happy.”

“Really,” I said, making sure I was breathing.

He nodded slowly.

I had to swallow down my heart.

“Julian,” he exhaled.

I got up so fast I almost spilled my drink. I had forgotten for a second that he was not an option for me. “I gotta go, I—”

“Wait,” he ordered, getting up.

I turned to leave, and his arm slid down over my right shoulder, his palm flat against my chest. He held me tight against him, keeping me there. I felt his nose rub over my shoulder. “Why do you wanna run away from me?”

“C’mon, Ry, I—”

“Ry is good,” he said, his lips brushing across the back of my neck before he inhaled deeply, breathing me in.

Without even thinking I’d shortened his name, like we were friends. What was with me?

His hand slid up my chest so his arm was around my neck, his breath warm on my ear. “Come home with me so I can talk to you.”

But how smart was that? If I was alone with Ryan Dean, could I trust myself?

“You need to let yourself go, Julian. You worry too much about what could happen instead of just living in the moment. Sometimes it’s all you have.”

“Like you know me at all,” I mumbled, because I liked having him wrapped around me. I would like it even better if he took off all his clothes. I leaned back a little, relaxing, and when he felt my weight shift, heard my slow

exhale of breath, his left arm went around my waist, his mouth against my ear.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited.”

I smiled because the familiar heat was sliding up my legs to my groin. No doubt about it, I was warming to the idea of doing all kinds of carnal things to him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He held me tighter, his voice gravely and deep, his lips brushing the side of my neck before he bit down gently, tenderly, just a nibble, just enough to taste my skin.

“So please just stay here with me.” He squeezed hard for emphasis. “Please.”

I let out a breath and closed my eyes. He was solid against me, stronger than I would have guessed, and he was clutching me close.

“Why do you wanna leave me?”

I just concentrated on breathing because it was getting harder to do.

“I feel good, right?” His lips were featherlight behind my ear.

He did. Why lie? “Yeah.”

His hand slid up under my T-shirt, flat on my stomach.

“I asked around about you, but no one I know has ever been in bed with you. Word is you just hook up for the night.”

“Oh yeah? Is that what everyone says?”

“Yep. My friend Marcus says that you turned him down at a party even though you were drunk, and he was naked.”

I chuckled. “Marcus Grant is a whore.”

“People say the same about me.”

“Yeah, but maybe they just don’t know you. Maybe you sleep around ’cause you’re looking for the right guy, not because you’re a cock whore.”

“Spoken like a true romantic.”

“Is that bad?”

“No,” he breathed. “I’ve just never met one before. Now let’s go already.”

I tried to turn my head so I could see him. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough,” he murmured, and I felt it more than I heard it. The sound slithered right through me. “And I want to know way more, which is new for me. I mean I don’t like anybody. Nobody makes me curious, but you... you, I have never been able to get out of my head. I think there’s a reason for that, one that I almost missed.”

His confession made my knees weak. Ryan Dean had been thinking about me. How amazing was that?

“I always enjoyed working with you on all my projects.

You’re great with people, cool under pressure, and watching you walk around in your jeans is a religious experience.” He sighed, pressing a kiss into the crook of my neck. “How do you not get that you’re gorgeous?”

But I wasn’t; he was. I knew exactly what I looked like, but if he thought I was beautiful, why would I correct him?

“You know you wanna sleep with me. Everybody wants to sleep with me,” he said as he kissed my jaw, then my ear.

I put a hand on the arm that he had around my neck.

“Oh yeah?” I teased. “Everybody?”

The impatient half-growl made me grunt before he pushed me forward so I was out of his arms. I turned around to face him and saw the look of naked need on his face.

“We can do whatever you want, Jules; I just want the chance to spend some time with you.”

“Why?”

“’Cause I do,” he said flatly.

I looked at him, and his smile shifted, became more intimate, his gaze hot, definitely carnal.

“Now what?” I asked him.

“Oh, you’re asking now?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, now you come with me,” he said, moving forward, throwing an arm around my neck and leading me toward the door.

There were more people in the club the later it got on a Friday night. As we threaded our way through the thickened crowd, I realized I didn’t want to get separated even for a second. As we were bumped and pushed from every side, I reached back for his hand and felt him grab it tightly.

Somehow, I ended up having to yank him out of the bodies crushed together at the edge of the dance floor. He banged into me, but instead of letting go after he steadied himself, he wrapped both arms around me.

“Julian,” he said as he kissed the side of my neck, his breath hot and wet in my ear, “come home with me, all right?”

I didn’t answer as he pushed me out of the club ahead of him. When we were outside, I turned to look at him.

“What?” He laughed softly, finishing with a sigh.

I gave him a look.

“C’mon,” he pressed me. “You know you’re coming home with me. Why are you even pretending to think about it?”

“I had a really good time with you tonight,” I said, letting out a breath, knowing full well the teasing was over. I was much too serious for casual sex. Even as attracted as I was to the man, how aroused I got just looking at him, and how much I wanted to do bad things to him, I couldn’t change the fact that I was hard-wired for long-term, promised monogamy. “You should go back in and pick somebody up.”

His smile was slow and lit his eyes. “I appreciate the offer, but no.”

I stared at him, and he looked right back. “You’re different from how I thought you were,” I said.

“And you’re exactly like I knew you were.”

“That so can’t be good.” I was sarcastic because I was at a loss.

“Oh yeah it can,” he said, and his voice was soft. I looked away because all his attention was a little overwhelming. “Come on,” he said, taking hold of my hand, tugging me after him.

The direction we were walking was strange because there was nothing there but a Jeep.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Are we riding in that?” I pointed.

“Yeah,” he said, looking closely at me. “Why? You too good to ride in my baby?”

“Seriously? This is your Jeep?” I asked as we walked up to it.

“Yeah, why?” He was scowling now.

“Nothing.” I was pleased with his ride, actually, because it was so real. Nothing pretentious about a ten-year-old Jeep covered in primer. “What’s with the Bondomobile?”

He looked uncomfortable suddenly, squirmy. “It gets banged up a lot, and I was painting it all the time, so I stopped.”

“Why? Are you a shitty driver?” I baited him. “Should I ride with you?”

“I’m a great driver,” he said quickly, “and you should definitely ride with me.”

“Then what’s with the story on the Jeep?”

“It gets beat up when I’m working.”

Vague answer from a man usually so forthcoming, but it was his car. How much did I really care? “I think cherry red would be hot.”

“I’ll consider it,” he said slowly, giving me a wicked grin and a quick wink. I smiled back. He was irresistible. So easygoing, so aware of how sexy he was with his dazzling smile, gorgeous body, and clear, shining eyes. Used to getting whatever he wanted because he could.

I nodded, trying to keep myself breathing. “So,” I said, standing there, looking down at the floorboard of the Jeep. I wasn’t sure if getting in was the best course of action; it seemed like the frying pan into the fire.

“Are you gonna get in?”

I looked up at him. “I’m thinking.”

“Why?”

“’Cause I want to.”

“That makes no sense.”

“If you knew me better, it would.”

He nodded. “You think too much. Get in.”

“You know I—”

“I’m just gonna feed ya,” he told me. “Swear.”

I got in.

## II

RYAN'S apartment was close to the Marina District, in a security building with a doorman. He greeted the man by name, and they exchanged some small talk.

"What?" he asked me when he caught me smiling.

"Nothin', Mr. Dean."

He clipped me with his elbow. "Shut up."

I followed him down the hall to the end unit, and he held open the door for me. He brushed by me to flip on the lights.

I glanced around quickly as I followed after him. "Oh, it's nice in here."

He looked at me funny. "You thought what? That I lived in some studio apartment all grunged out? You figure that the life of an ex-model is what, glamorous on the outside but like a ghetto inside?"

"Well, yeah," I assured him. "It's how the rest of us deal with all you beautiful people. We tell ourselves that you must have empty, wasted hulls of lives."

He rolled his eyes like I was stupid before he walked out of the room.

I looked around, checking the titles of his books, his DVD collection. The patio door was open and a light was on, so I wandered outside. I was surprised to find a large, thriving herb garden. I would have never guessed he had one.

"There's an awful lot of plants out here on your lanai, Mr. Dean," I called out to him.

"I mix stuff." His voice reached me from the depths of the apartment.

“Medicinally?” I raised my voice so it would bounce back.

“Sort of,” he answered, walking back into the living room at the same time I did.

I studied him. “What are you? A witch, a warlock, whatever? You make potions?”

“No.” He made a face. “I’m not a witch.”

“You sure?” I taunted, because he actually seemed annoyed that I was accusing him of some nefarious plot with eye of newt.

“I’m not a witch.” He was emphatic.

“But you do make potions?” I asked to make sure he knew I was listening.

“You know, for someone who drank quite a bit tonight, you’re awfully clear-headed and inquisitive.”

“That was hours ago, and that drink at the club was more water than anything else.”

He grunted.

“Are the plants poisonous? Are you brewing up poison on your stove?”

He muttered something under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“Something about guys you just fuck?” I chuckled.

He growled at me. “I said that guys I bring home just to fuck never take the tour and ask questions.”

I laughed at how disgruntled he looked.

“Shit.”

“I can go,” I offered lightly.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said, shoving me back toward the large bay window. “Go check out my view of the city—it’s nice.”

I had no interest in the view. Him being evasive about the plants growing in his herb garden was infinitely more interesting. What proved an even greater discovery was that there was not one framed picture of anyone anywhere in his apartment.

“Look at all the shiny lights,” he said playfully before leaving the room again.

“What’s growing in the herb garden, Dean?” I called after him.

“Give it a rest already!”

I could see being evasive about something illegal, but I knew what I was looking for, and there was nothing a member of law enforcement would have a problem with growing in his house. It was funny that he was so prickly about it. Also funny was the lack of photographic evidence of family or friends. I found that really odd.

“What?” he asked as he walked back in, having shed his leather jacket.

“No pictures?”

He gave me a weird look. “No.”

I nodded and walked over to the walls, looked at his artwork. “These are nice.”

“Yeah... yeah, they’re great,” he said absently, grabbing my arm and pulling me over to the barstool. I sat down at his kitchen counter while he walked around to the fridge.

“So what kind of dessert do ya want?”

My elbow went down on his counter, then my head on my hand. “I dunno, whatever, as long as you don’t sprinkle something from the herb garden over it.”

“You’re funny.”

I smiled at the dripping sarcasm.

He made brownies from scratch. Who did that? He talked to me as he worked, smiling, telling me stories that were by turns funny and gross and eye-opening. The day-today life of a model was fascinating.

“You should write a book.”

He grunted as he prepared the plate he was going to put the brownies on. I had no idea that anywhere but at a restaurant did people concern themselves with presentation.

And he used raspberry glaze. How did he just have that in his kitchen cupboard?

“What? It’s a raspberry and cream cheese swirl brownie.

You have to have the glaze on the plate. It all goes together.”

“Uh-huh,” I agreed. “Pass it over here. I just wanna eat it.”

His face scrunched up like I was a heathen as I gestured for him to hurry up and give me my dessert. “Try and savor the flavor of the... uh....” He ended with a groan.

“What?” I asked around the brownie in my mouth.

His grin came fast as he wiped my face. “You want some milk?”

I nodded because I was chewing.

When I finished with the second one, I told him I was in love.

“Don’t tease,” he said, his eyes flicking to mine, liquid with heat.

I would have licked my plate clean, but he made a face over that suggestion, so I washed it because I wasn’t raised in a barn. He had done all the other dishes while the brownies baked, talking to me the whole time, so the last of the cleanup was minimal. As I stood at his sink, he came up behind me and pressed a kiss to the side of my neck.

Something about the constant physical contact was almost as intimate as the kiss we shared earlier. It was like he had to touch me, and I liked it a lot.

We talked for a long time more in the kitchen about so many different things, finally ending with how well his show was going and my promotion. Afterward, as he looked through his DVD collection for a movie, I noticed a cabinet that I had missed on my first walkthrough. It was big, but dark wood and metal, so if you weren’t looking, it blended in with the wall, tucked into a corner. I reached for the handle to open it.

“Can I look in here?” I called out to him so I couldn’t be accused of snooping.

“Wait!” Ryan barked out a warning, but it was too late.

The door popped open, like the handle was spring-loaded, and I found myself looking at two beautifully etched swords, one long, one short. They looked like they belonged in every samurai movie I had ever seen.

“Shit,” he said under his breath as he stopped beside me, having almost leaped across the room.

“What is this?” I asked, like Vicki Vale in Bruce Wayne’s inner sanctum.

He wet his lips nervously.

“They’re beautiful, Ry.” I tipped my head at the swords.

“What are they called?”

He pushed his fingers through his thick hair.

“Informally, the long one there is a katana, the shorter one is a wakizashi.”

I nodded. “Can you use them, or are they just for show?”

“No,” he coughed. “I can use them.”

“Really?” I was surprised. It was hard to imagine the gorgeous man with the delicate, fragile features I saw before me being able to wield the weapons I was looking at. “Do you cut people up in little pieces with them, Ry?”

“Not people,” he said quickly, pushing in front of me, closing the doors together, pulling both handles down and then pushing them in. They disappeared into the wood, flush, not a chance for me to open it again without him there, which was perhaps his intent. It was almost as though the cabinet had been left open accidentally.

“Go sit down in the living room, willya, please?”

“Stop taking the tour?” I suggested playfully.

“Just... I’m trying to be romantic and seduce you, and you’re killing my vibe.”

“Sorry.” I smiled at him, walking back to the living room and flopping down on his red leather couch. “Huh.”

“What?” He seemed surprised.

“It hardly gave at all.”

“You don’t like it?”

I didn’t, but that was rude to say. In fact, I liked nothing about his place. It was cold and sterile and did not reflect the man’s warmth at all.

“Julian?”

I looked around and felt nothing. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I would say that you were messing with me about this being your apartment.”

I finished by looking up at him. “It doesn’t feel like you in here.”

His eyes locked on mine. “It doesn’t?”

“No.”

He trembled slightly. “How so?”

“You’re warm, and this place is cold.”

“You mean I’m hot,” he teased, bending toward me.

I reached up and caught his face in my hands, stilling him. “Yeah, you’re plenty hot, but that’s not what I mean,” I said, tracing his cheek with my thumb. “You’re like... home.”

He caught his breath and jerked away from me.

“Sorry,” I said softly, ready to stand and walk out of his apartment. We could tease and play, but that only worked up to a point. I had the worst timing sometimes, and my words got heavy with meaning. “I didn’t mean to make you—”

“No,” he cut me off, his hands on my shoulders, holding on, the movement itself, and not the power exerted, keeping me in my seat. “I love what you said.”

My eyes searched his. “Ry—”

“How come you never have any fun?” he asked as he took a seat beside me.

He was deliberately changing the track of the conversation. We had been headed down a serious path, but he wanted to keep things light, breezy. He was giving me no reason to run from him. He was taking no chances. Little did he know that the more serious the conversation, the more interested I would be.

“Jules?”

“I have fun,” I said slowly, taking the bait, not wanting to scare him either. I wanted the ease from when we were in the kitchen together back.

“When?”

“All the time.”

“You think so?” he asked, stretching his arms out across the back of the couch. “Because I think you’re full of crap.”

“Do you.”

“Yeah, I do. When do you have fun? I never see you out, and believe me, I’ve looked, and like I said earlier, the guys that do know you—not one of them has ever slept with you.”

“So having lots of sex, that’s fun? I should sleep around and that would show everyone that I know how to have a good time?”

“No. I dunno. You’re so hard to figure out. I mean, it took me so long to even see you.” I snorted out a laugh as he groaned. “Shit, that didn’t come out right at all.”

But I understood what he was saying. I sort of faded into the background if you weren’t watching, and if you weren’t looking for me... no one ever noticed me right away.

It wasn’t who I was. I tended to be the quiet guy surrounded by loud, beautiful people. My best friend was a prime example. Hot, magnetic, in-your-face Cash Vega was balanced out by me and the quiet I offered.

“Julian—”

“I get it,” I chuckled.

“No, you don’t. On one hand, you’re gorgeous, and I, along with everybody else, just want to get you in bed, but then you’re so cold and reserved, it’s scary to even try and talk to you.”

I was a lot of things, but cold wasn't one of them. "Aww, c'mon, cold? Really?"

"You don't know what you look like, Jules, with your deep, dark, scary blue eyes and the way you carry yourself.

You're so unaffected by everyone and everything. I thought you were a conceited asshole until I realized that you're just shy around new people, especially men."

"I'm not some head case, ya know. I—"

"I know. You just need to loosen up."

"By being a slut."

"That's not what I said," he corrected. "But you do need to get laid."

I couldn't argue with that.

"I can take care of that if you want."

"No," I assured him, even as I let him slide his hand up the back of my neck into my hair. Something about him soothed me instead of putting me on guard.

"Why not? Think of the fun."

Could he be any cuter?

"Can I ask a question?" he asked, shifting closer to me so we were shoulder to shoulder, his knee against mine.

"Course," I told him, rolling my head sideways to look at his profile.

"You get tested?"

"For what?"

“You know for what,” he said pointedly, serious now.

“Don’t be an idiot.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, you?”

“Every six months.” He was matter-of-fact about it.

“And?”

“Clean, of course. You?”

“Please, I’ve never had anything.”

“Why’re you smiling at me like that?” He grinned back at me.

“’Cause I bet you’re the kinda guy that carries condoms in his pocket when he goes out, huh?”

“Yessir.” He nodded, looking at me, fingering the hem of my sweater. “Can I ask you another quick question?”

“Yeah.”

His gaze was heavy on me. “Can I see your glasses again?”

He had returned them in the Jeep and was now asking for them back. I nodded. Reaching out, he was very gentle when he took my glasses off and put them carefully down on his coffee table. When he looked back at me, I heard him catch his breath.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

I let out a deep breath. “I had no idea you wanted me to, I swear to God.”

He nodded and bit his bottom lip.

“You’re adorable.”

There was quick head shaking. “No-no... hot, sexy, gorgeous, whatever you want, but not adorable. That’s no good.”

“It’s good,” I assured him, my hand on the back of his neck, leaning in, pulling him close at the same time.

“Everything about you is very good.”

The second my lips touched his, he opened for me, drawing me inside, sucking my tongue into his mouth. He was in my lap, his folded legs clamping around my hips, his groin pushing into my abdomen. His firm, round, muscular ass was sliding back and forth over the bulge in my jeans as he moaned low in his throat. It was very sexy, his want, his need.

He breathed out my name before his mouth covered mine again, and he was all over me, pressing, straining, his hands on my belt buckle. It felt like it was going to be fast and frantic, and I didn’t want that.

Reaching up, I cupped his face in my hands and slanted my mouth over his. I kissed him deep and hard, my tongue making love to his, letting him know without benefit of words that he had me. I wasn’t going anywhere. I slowed him down, sucked and licked and nibbled his lips, my hands never moving from his face. There was a deep, primal groan before he pulled back, gasping for air.

“You taste good,” I told him, my voice low and full of heat.

He inhaled deeply as he looked at me, his eyes wet and glazed, heavy-lidded, his lips swollen from my attention.

I reached for him, but he leaned back, his jaw clenching at the same time his hand flattened on my chest.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “I know you don’t just fuck, Julian.

Everybody told me how you are. You’ve got this whole good-boy reputation going on.”

“You make it sound so bad.”

“No, it’s not that... I just mean that if you’re staying, then maybe you wanna see me and spend time with me,

’cause you don’t just pick up some trick and follow him home.”

“No, I don’t,” I said, my hands sliding up the muscular thighs on either side of me. The man was toned and cut and hard, and I wanted him naked under me. “I’m not built like that.”

“But I am,” he confessed sadly, his voice hitching. “It’s all I am.”

“No, it’s not,” I assured him, staring into his magnificent eyes, shifting him in my lap. “And I think that’s why you wanted me to call. Maybe sleeping around isn’t so fun anymore.”

“Julian,” he gasped, pushing down into me as he unbuttoned his short-sleeved shirt slowly, never once taking his eyes off mine as he peeled it off.

The sculpted chest, the rippling abs, all the smooth golden skin begging to be touched, it was all I could do not to attack him. Head tipped back, I watched his eyes close. “Put your hands on me. You know you want to.”

And it was just stupid at that point to deny myself anything. I wanted him; he obviously felt the same.

Senseless to say no. I had always been attracted to him, and finding out, over time, that he was not the materialistic, brainless but beautiful creature I had thought he was, was humbling. I made snap judgments about people, and it was a terrible flaw. The man was sarcastic, gorgeous, funny, and sexy, and he had the sweetest mouth... how could I say no?

But the whole little seduction scene he had going was not going to work for me. He wasn’t allowed to treat me like all the others.

“Ryan. You need to look at me,” I told him gently, but with a thread of warning, my voice dropping dangerously low.

His head snapped up, and his eyes opened wide. It was the tone of my voice that demanded immediate attention. He was surprised, I could tell, staring deeply into my eyes.

“I’m not some trick you picked up and you’re gonna fuck and forget.” His breath caught, and I saw the muscles in his jaw cord. “Don’t take your eyes off me,” I ordered him, my voice firm. There would be no argument.

“No, Julian.” He trembled just slightly. “I won’t.”

I slid my hands up his collarbone to his neck, over his jaw to his face, my fingers gently exploring, tracing his brows, his cheeks, sliding over his skin. “You have to trust me,” I told him, my voice a husky growl. “Do you?”

“Oh, yes.” His eyes were glazed, the pupils huge.

I smiled lazily, then pulled him forward, ran my tongue slowly over the seam of his lips before he opened for me. I kissed him deeply, slowly, my mouth sealed to his. I inhaled him, the suction strong, his bottom lip mauled before I saw how far down his throat my tongue could go. The whimpering noise he made, the surrender I was waiting to hear, went right through me. I put my hands on his skin and pushed him down hard under me on the couch. He fought me for a second, testing my strength, so I was rough with him and heard his breath catch.

He moaned when my mouth touched his skin, trembling when I bit him. “Julian... I want you so bad.”

Which was good since the feeling was mutual.

“I—” Ryan began.

I stood up with him still wrapped around me and walked down the short hall to his bedroom. We fell together on his bed, him under me when we hit the mattress.

Standing up, I grabbed one foot, divesting him of one motorcycle boot and then the other before turning my attention to the skin-tight boot-cut jeans. I

had his fly open seconds later, leaning over to place wet kisses on his abdomen to distract him from the slow slide of denim off his hips. When they were gone, wadded up and thrown into a corner, I admired the long muscular legs I had uncovered.

There was no part of him not drool-worthy. After I pulled off my sweater and T-shirt, I realized that he was staring up at me.

“What?”

“You’re so beautiful,” he breathed, his eyes all over me.

“Why do you hide that body under all those clothes?”

“Clothes are a necessity,” I told him, leaning down to peel off his thong. It was very sexy, but his skin was better.

The first view of his long, beautiful cock made my mouth go dry. “But Christ, they shouldn’t be for you.” He whimpered in the back of his throat, and it was the sexiest sound, rolling through me, making me catch my breath. When I took his cock in hand, his groan was deep and hoarse. “Look at you needing me.”

“Julian,” he panted, trembling under me, the rippled abs contorting, his engorged shaft jerking in my hand, the beads of pre-come already leaking from the flared head.

I smiled down at him. “I bet you taste like dessert.”

He pointed to his right, to his nightstand. “I just got tes-tested two weeks ago. I have the results right there for you to—oh God!”

I stopped his rambling when I bent forward and swept my tongue around his shaft.

Only my name alone escaped his lips.

“Oh, he likes that.”

“Julian—I... Julian.”

My smile, if he'd opened his eyes to see it, was evil.

Leaning over, I sucked the length of him down my throat. He nearly came off the bed.

“Julian,” he gasped, his hands in my hair, fisting, holding tight. “What are you... I... I'm clean, I swear. I have the paper right fuckin' there if you... I have... ohmygod!”

It was my tongue; I knew it felt like heaven sliding over hot, sensitized skin. That, combined with the sucking and laving, the way my gag reflex was nonexistent, how much I loved to give head—I had Ryan Dean. He was at my mercy.

He was mine.

“Julian... Julian,” he chanted my name, the fingers in my hair tightening and loosening, his body convulsing, his back bowing as he arched up off the bed. “You gotta stop...”

I'm gonna come, and I don't wanna... Julian!”

I swirled my tongue over the flared, swollen head, then down each side, gently but also using my teeth, making him yell my name, clutch my head, the fingers buried in my hair, splayed on my scalp. I traced the thick vein, licked hard, loving his smell, the feel of his skin, the sounds he made. He was panting as I made everything wet with saliva, stroking him, finally pumping his cock with the hand fisted around the long, hard, velvet length of him.

“Julian... baby... I....”

But I wasn't going to stop, I wanted to know what he tasted like, suck every drop out of him, leave him drained and spent and completely at my mercy. His body that was to die for would be mine to do with as I pleased. As he

thrust upward into the back of my throat, writhing under me, bucking up off the bed, I sucked hard.

He screamed my name as he came, his orgasm rocking him as he filled me, his cock swollen as the fluid rushed from him into me. I swallowed him down, holding him inside until he went soft, waiting as he rode out the aftershocks of his bliss, licking him clean, leaving nothing.

When he was still, the spent, flaccid cock finally slipped from my lips, and I rose over him.

“God,” he whimpered. “You’re fucking amazing.”

I arched an eyebrow for him.

“Kiss me, fuck me... please... Julian... please.”

I bent, and his arms wrapped around me as he lifted for my kiss.

Our tongues tangled, and he tasted himself on me, just the thought sending a wave of heat through me. He shoved me back, pointed at the nightstand, and when I opened the drawer, I saw the bottle of lube. There was also the biggest box of condoms I had ever seen in my life.

“Do not go near those condoms,” he warned me. “All I want to feel is you inside me, and when you come, I want it in me... deep in me.” His eyes were liquid as they locked on mine.

“Have you ever done it without a condom?”

“No. I-I never have.”

I was overwhelmed, only me, ever, and my resolve faltered. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to—I never wanted to before, but now... I want you buried in me now,” he said, arching up off the bed. “I’ll beg if you want.”

“You never had to beg me for anything.”

“But I will if you need that to bareback.”

He was the sexiest man I had ever met, and I had never hoped to hear him say the things that had just tumbled from his lips. I wanted more than anything to be inside of him with nothing between us, but the reality of it had never even crossed my mind. For me it was one of the great perks of monogamy and one of the many reasons the idea of a committed relationship was so appealing. You didn't have to have safe sex. You could have unsafe sex whenever you wanted, however you wanted. The fact that he wanted me to be even closer to him than I would normally be touched me deeply.

“Julian.”

“It means a lot. That you trust me....that you know that I'm a good guy,” I choked up because I was frankly overwhelmed.

“Then grab the lube, Julian, and come here.”

When I moved back to him, kneeling above him on the bed, he spread his legs, bending them at the knee, and lifted up so I was presented with his pink, fluttering hole.

“Fuck me,” he whispered as his eyes drifted closed.

I squinted down at him.

After a second, he opened his eyes and looked up at me.

“Julian?”

“Baby, what gives you the idea that any part of us being in bed is ever gonna be just about me?”

He was stunned; it was all over his face. “But that amazing, spine-tingling, ohmygod-I've-never-had-a-better blowjob was all about me.”

I snorted out a laugh. “I enjoyed the hell outta that, watching you burn up, watching your eyes roll back in your head, listening to the sounds you make

when you're about to blow your load. Uh, yeah, I got off on that big time."

"But—"

I crawled off the bed fast, and before he could protest, I yanked off my wingtips and socks, my jeans and briefs, until I was naked before him. His eyes locked on my shaft.

"Jesus, Julian, you're huge."

But there was no worry in his voice as there had been with others, only awe and genuine appreciation.

"Could you... can I suck that, please?"

"Nope," I told him, climbing back on the bed, grabbing the lube and coating my hands. The second I wrapped my fingers around his semi-erect cock, he hissed in his breath.

"What are you doing?"

"Feel good, baby?"

"Jules...." His moan sounded strangled, and he slowly started to lower his legs.

I stopped him. "No, hold them there. I can't reach you otherwise."

"Reach what?" But he understood the second I slipped a finger inside him.  
"Julian!"

I slid my finger out, then in, swirling around the entrance before sliding in deep, passing the inner ring of muscle, but not far enough to hit his prostate, interested in getting him ready for me, stretching him, loosening him.

"Jules... please...."

When I added a second slick finger, he yelled my name, his voice hoarse and raspy. The stroking of his shaft, from base to tip, was driving him crazy.

Combined with the fingers, three now, plunging in and out, he was trembling with his need for me.

“Julian,” he panted. “I get it. You’re a goddamn saint.

You’re not selfish in any way. You want me hot and throbbing and begging, so I’m begging, please... if you don’t fuck me, really... I’m gonna die.” I withdrew the fingers from his ass to a hiss of sucked in breath but continued stroking the rock-hard shaft. “Jules,” he whimpered.

Leaning back, I lubed my cock until it gleamed in the faint light and then pressed myself gently to his entrance.

“You tell me if—”

But I didn’t have time to finish before he surged up to meet me, impaling himself, his body opening up and taking me in, swallowing the length of me. The unbelievable heat, his muscles clenching around me, holding me, how tight he was... I was certain my heart stopped.

“Move,” he begged me, “please, move.”

I slid slightly out and then rammed back into him, hard and deep, sheathing myself to the hilt. “You’re so hot inside, Ry. You feel so good.”

He cried out, his hands digging into the bed, the sheet bunching as he clawed at it, and his legs wrapped around my hips as I thrust into him.

Normally I went slowly. I checked. I was gentle. I was

“that guy.” But with Ryan—and it made no sense—it was like I wanted to claim him, mark him, and make sure that he would never want or need anyone else. The way he rose to meet me as I pounded down into him, the two of us pressed together so that there was no ending and no beginning, was a revelation.

“Julian.” His voice was a throaty rasp. “Please... don’t stop.”

I was sheathed in his hot, wet channel, held impossibly tight and buried to the balls in his ass. Stopping was not even possible. I plunged in and out of him, stroking deep, the writhing and the fingers digging into my skin letting me know, without words, that I had found the perfect spot, the perfect angle, to bring him bliss.

When his orgasm finally roared through him, triggering mine, my name became a prayer as he coated my abdomen.

Semen caught between us as I fell on top of him, pinning him under me to the bed as I came deep inside his body.

I tried to roll off, but he held me tight, his face buried in my throat as he trembled.

“Ry?”

“I don’t want to let you go.” He shuddered hard.

I wrapped my arms around him and rolled over so that he was draped over me, the cum and sweat sticking us together. “Then don’t,” I said with a deep chuckle. “Keep me.”

He lifted his face from the hollow of my throat and looked down at me. “You can’t... I... just don’t say things like that if you don’t mean it.”

“I always mean what I say,” I said honestly, reaching up to touch his face, frame it with my hands, and move the mane of hair back so I could see the shining eyes. “Now go and get me some water.”

He gave me an impish grin as he lifted off my spent cock before rolling off the bed. I had a moment of perfect peace, lying still in his bed, staring at the ceiling. My epiphany came at that moment. I wanted to be the only man sleeping with Ryan Dean for the rest of his life.

“What are you thinking?”

I had not realized he was back, standing beside the bed, a glass of water in each hand. He had obviously guzzled some down before returning, as there

were drops sliding down his chest.

“That I need my damn water,” I teased, holding out my hand for the glass.

He didn’t move. I just looked my fill of him.

“What you said before, did you mean it?”

“What’s that?”

“That if I want, I can keep you?”

My heart was suddenly in my throat. “Yessir.”

“Okay, then,” he said, leaning toward me. “Now you get water.”

I drained the large bar glass, and he offered me the rest of his. When I was done, he took it from me before crawling back on the bed. He moved slowly, fluidly, moving until he was hovering over me, his eyes glinting in the light. I had the definite impression that I was food and realized that I would willingly be consumed by Ryan Dean.

I took a breath, infusing my voice with calm. “So you’re thinkin’ maybe you want me?”

“Want, need, having, keeping.” His expression changed suddenly, darkening, no more playing. “God, I hope I can. I hope I can keep you.”

“You can, you’ll see,” I told him. “Now ride me, I wanna fill you up again.”

The whimper of need from the back of his throat was very sexy. He rose above me fast, studying my face as he straddled my hips, his eyes narrowing in half as he lowered himself over my shaft inch by inch, so I could feel it all, until I was buried in him. He looked so beautiful above me, and he felt like heaven. Between the lube from earlier and my semen still coating him inside, I slid in easily.

“You feel so good,” I confessed, reaching for his cock, my hand stroking him lazily.

He shivered hard, rising and lowering. “So do you...

Julian, I—so do you.”

Already we had found our rhythm. Just in a short time, I knew where to push, and he knew to move slowly and let everything build. My thrust upward, my fingers tightening on his hard, throbbing cock at the same time was too much for him and sensory overload for me. As I found my release, he followed me seconds later, my abdomen once more coated with him. When he demanded I never, ever leave him, I didn't second-guess his words.

### III

HIS hands were everywhere, and I smiled into the pillow. I shifted, and there was pressure exerted between my shoulder blades, gently stroking to keep me from getting up.

“Don’t move.”

“Yes, Ry,” I sighed, loving the whispering.

He cleared his throat. “How do you feel?”

“Pretty damn good.” I could not contain my grin. “How ’bout you?”

“I’m fine,” he said distractedly, “but could you—is it okay if I turn on the light?”

“Why?”

“Please.”

“If you must,” I teased him, closing my eyes, wondering vaguely why it was so important but not enough to really care.

I heard the click of the light, felt his hands run over my skin, pressing, touching, almost like he was checking me for injuries.

“What’re you doing?” I chuckled, rolling over onto my back, opening my eyes a crack, squinting up at him.

His eyes were huge as he stared down at me. “Julian, your skin is... your hair... you’re... can you look at me?”

“I am looking at you.”

“No, could you...?” He trailed off, his breath catching, shivering suddenly. “Julian, look at me. Open your eyes wide and look at me.”

I did as I was asked, breaking into a smile seconds later when he caught his breath. “I am so not this interesting, by the way.”

“Oh.” His eyes filled as he stared into mine.

Shit. “Honey, what’s wrong?” I reached for him, worried suddenly.

“Julian,” he barely got out, “you’re fine. You look the same.”

“Not glowing in postcoital euphoria, ya mean?”

“No, you just—” The way his voice hitched, how he had to bite down on his trembling lower lip was almost funny.

“You’re fine. You’re perfectly fine.”

He had not taken the bait of the sarcasm; instead, he was completely engrossed in my appearance. “What’s going on, Ry?”

His smile a moment later was breathtaking. “I wanted it to be you so... I hoped.” He swallowed hard.

I was confused, but the question died on my lips when he leaned over and snapped off the light, plunging the room back into darkness. His head pressed to my chest.

“What’re you do—”

“I’m listening to your heart.”

“Why?” I asked, inhaling the scent of his hair.

“Be still.”

He was acting weird, off-the-chart weird, but his warm skin felt so good next to mine that the reason for the contact hardly mattered. He had to touch

me, *had to*, and the knowledge ran through me and warmed all the hard to reach places.

“I knew it. I should have just listened to... but I don’t trust myself anymore,” he said more to himself than to me.

“Knew what?”

He let out a deep breath, almost a sigh, slipping his leg over mine and pressing into my side. “Julian, I’m keeping you,” he said matter-of-factly.

I snorted out a laugh. “I thought you already were.”

“God,” he said, leaning into me, “you’re so amazing.

Anybody else, I would be freaking them out.” He lifted up, moving over me so he could straddle my thighs and stare down at me in the semi-darkness.

“I knew it was you, Julian.

I just knew it.”

The moonlight streaming through the window illuminated him above me. I saw the way he was looking at me, possessively, watching his own hands as they slid over my chest. I had never been this riveting to anyone before.

I wanted to pull him down, because I was getting excited. Just the way he was touching me, slowly, so intimately, like he owned me, was heating me up all over again.

“You’re mine, you know,” he growled. The daring in his tone, the way he had marked me with bites, it maybe should have scared me, but none of it did.

“Am I?”

“Oh, yes,” he assured me, pressing his ass against my cock that was already straining for him.

“And does that go both ways?”

The startled expression, how big his pretty eyes got, it was adorable.

“Ry?”

“I just... I thought I would have to—”

“What?” I cut him off, shifting under him, leaning up to ease him close.

“You thought you’d have to convince me?” I smiled as I rolled him over onto his back. “Why would you need to do that? You’re a gift, Dean, a fuckin’ gift.”

“Julian.” His voice hitched, and the moan that escaped when my stiff cock slid over his own velvety hardness was very sexy. “Just lemme hold you.”

“I don’t think I can do that yet,” I said, bending to him, burying my tongue in his mouth, tasting him again. He stretched his arms wide, then let them fall down onto the bed. I smiled and sucked on his bottom lip. “You’re giving up?”

“For once, yeah, ’cause I finally can. Just do whatever the hell you want to me.”

I stared down into his beautiful eyes. I promised him I’d be gentle as I shifted on the bed, back to his nightstand where he kept his condoms and lube.

“Are you worried?”

I smiled over my shoulder at him. “About what?”

“That you fucked me without a condom.”

“No, you told me you’re clean.”

“And you believe me.”

“Why would you lie to me?”

“I wouldn’t... ever. And I didn’t.” He took a quivering breath.

“I know.” I smiled back at him. “So no, I’m not worried.

Are you worried about me?”

He closed his eyes, his grin wide. “No. You don’t sleep around, Julian.”

“How do you know?”

“I know,” he breathed out. “Come here.”

When I slid my slick fingers inside of him, he moaned low, the sound torn from him, and wrapped his legs around my hips. I was gentle with him, opening him up, and then couldn’t stop and buried myself in him, hard and deep. He was so tight and so hot, and I felt him tremble under me.

When I fisted his cock in my hand, he arched up off the bed.

“Julian,” he cried out, and he gasped when I drew myself out only to pound back down into him a moment later. “Oh baby, please.”

So sexy, the deep smoky voice, his head thrown back, his back arched, completely consumed with what I was doing to him, his legs tightening to keep me close. I leaned forward to kiss him, and his hands went to my face, holding me there, swallowing my tongue.

HOURS went by the way they do when you’re not paying attention to anything but your lover in your arms. I rolled over, and he came with me, wrapped tight, tangled together.

The bed was a sweaty, sticky disaster, only the fitted sheet still in place.

“I didn’t hurt you did I?” I asked him gently.

“No.” His voice was soft, his breath warm against my throat, his mouth on my skin.

“You like it rough.” I grinned, my eyes drifting closed.

“I like you.”

“Made for me,” I said, leaning my cheek against his forehead.

“What?” he asked sleepily, and I knew he was testing to see if I’d say it again. Not a game, just fishing. Making sure I was for real.

“You heard me,” I said, my voice husky, letting out a deep contented sigh. “We fit, and you know it. Like you were made for me.”

He kissed up my throat to my mouth. “Julian,” he whispered before his lips covered mine for a moment. “We are so much more than you could even know.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You have no idea,” he murmured as he shifted against me, over me. I put a hand on the back of his neck and pulled him down so I could kiss him again. “Let me explain it to you.”

Whatever he wanted.

## IV

I WAS thinking about Cash on my way home because I wanted to tell him about Ryan. The stunning new development in my love life would not seem real until I bounced it off my best friend and heard what he served back. Sometime over the course of five years, Cash Vega had become the person whose opinion most mattered.

*There had been no fanfare. At our regular Monday morning meeting, Miles Teruya, the managing director at Miller Freedman San Francisco, had announced that Vega would now be working with Nash, and Reynolds and Tyge would form the other new team. It had been fine with me as Eric Tyge and I had not hit it off, and looking at Cash Vega all day was going to be a treat for me. I would have been his partner any day of the week.*

*With his thick, jet black hair and dark, chocolate-brown eyes, Carlos Vega, nicknamed Cash by his father, was the kind of guy who other guys just hated on sight. He had a profile that belonged on coins, with his aquiline nose, full lips, and square-cut chin. His eyebrows were thick and looked like they'd been painted on, so perfectly arched, quick to raise or furrow with his mood. The deep bronze tan stayed year-round, and when he wanted to show off, he could wear everything tight to flaunt his broad chest, flat stomach, and bulging biceps. He looked like some gorgeous Aztec god come to life. But what inspired the most jealousy from other men was not his beauty, but his voice and how he used it. He spoke English with the warmth of Spanish haunting it, and the tone was so smooth that sometimes people would keep him talking just because they enjoyed listening. Women—and men—could not be trusted to keep their hands to themselves when he was looking into their eyes and speaking at the same time.*

*That first day, Cash had come in to the new office that we would be sharing and asked me what I was doing.*

*“I do this sometimes to get the blood rushing to my head,”*

*I had explained from my position. "I think it helps with getting the creative juices flowing."*

*"I see," Cash said as he crouched down beside me. "You want me to stand on my head too?"*

*This was one of the many things I did that had driven Eric Tyge apeshit crazy.*

*"Only if you want to."*

*"Okay," he agreed, and I smiled wide. I got excited thinking that maybe my new partnership was going to work out. "But I don't sing karaoke or do Outward Bound bullshit or do trust exercises. This is as much of this bonding crap as we're gonna do."*

*"I agree," I assured him.*

*He did a handstand next to me, his wingtips on the wall beside mine.*

*"Right on." I smiled at him, and he grinned back crazily.*

*"What?"*

*"You said right on," he clarified.*

*"Eric probably told you I wasn't well."*

*"He wished me good luck," he said honestly. "He thinks you're manic."*

*"Huh."*

*"How come no one likes you around here, Nash?"*

*"I dunno. I think they just don't get me?"*

*A quiet grunt greeted my statement.*

*I had known I was getting a difficult reputation, but I hadn't been sure how to go about fixing it. I just wanted ideas that were unique and fresh. New spins on old themes seemed like cheating, and in my opinion, it was just lazy. I wanted to think out of the box, and everyone else was happy to be where they were inside. The flip side of the argument was that while I was striving for perfection, I was also the only one not bringing in any money. None of my ideas turned into actual campaigns because I needed a partner, someone to bounce thoughts off of, to take them from the development phase to the presentation phase. Someone needed to help me translate what was in my head.*

*"Well, it's doing something," Cash told me after another minute. "I think I know why this is actually a form of torture in some cultures."*

*But he didn't get down. He remained standing on his head as long as I did and then took me to lunch. That Friday night I met him and his wife Phoebe for drinks. Sunday they had invited me to barbecue with them and a few other friends.*

*At the following Monday morning meeting, I put a steaming cappuccino down in front of him, and he drank it like it was expected. We traded notes back and forth until Mira Towne, the senior partner, told us to knock it off. A week later, the firm got a shot at the Dunbar account because Crandall Media missed a deadline for Stella Verity's new fragrance Velvet Steam.*

*Cash and I had stayed up all night, but there was no way to make Velvet Steam not sound stupid. At nine in the morning when everyone came back, we were still there playing hoops in our office with the Nerf ball and the trash can.*

*"Are you two going to the meeting?"*

*We turned with the ball, Cash draped over the top of me as he was defending his goal. Stella Verity stood in our doorway looking just as stunning as she had when she had appeared on Legacy for all those years. I remembered my mother watching the nighttime soap every Thursday.*

*"Hi." I smiled at her.*

*“Hey.” Cash smiled, too, his voice low.*

*“Well,” she purred, sliding into our office, pouring herself into Cash’s chair. “Aren’t you two the prettiest of the bunch?”*

*We straightened up, and her smile deepened. “Disheveled, sleepy, and unshaven. Did you know that’s my favorite?” We both just stood there, grinning at her like idiots. She looked at me hard. “I’ve got a soft spot for hot boys with glasses and that mouth... lovely.” I could only stare. My brain had actually switched on. “And you,” she purred, looking at Cash. “Are you that gorgeous color all over?” She meant the deep bronze tan of his skin.*

*He nodded lazily. “Yes, ma’am.”*

*She smiled and then looked back at me. “What are you thinking, darling?”*

*“How about just ‘Steam’?”*

*“‘Steam’?”*

*“For the name of the fragrance.”*

*“Yes, love, I got that part.” She smiled demurely. “Go on.”*

*“It could mean so many things. There’s the sex angle, of course, but there’s also anger or heat or—”*

*“Power,” Cash offered, following where I was going. “We could have more than one ad, and it would appeal to different people in different ways. The print material would be amazing.”*

*It had been the first time we were in creative sync. We talked out our ideas in one voice, finishing each other’s sentences, building one idea on another, the shared vision exactly the same. It was like I could read his mind. I understood the value of a great partner at that moment and knew I had found mine.*

*Stella was staring at us as Miles poked his head in our office with Todd Joplin right behind him.*

*“What’s going on in here?” he asked pointedly as Stella swiveled around in my chair to look at him.*

*“I like what these two have,” she informed them and put up her hand as they began to argue. “I’m not saying I won’t hear the other pitches. I’m just saying they’ll need to be exceptional to change my mind.”*

*She was as good as her word. We had heard later that she sat still and listened to every other pitch before getting up and announcing that the two cute guys in the glass office by the water cooler would get her backing. The firm had the account as long as Cash and I were on the creative team. It had been the first account the two of us had ever worked together and landed at Miller Freedman.*

It had been seamless from that time forward, five years of another person totally getting me. Cash could always follow my fractured train of thought, no matter how far off the rails it went, and do improvised brainstorming with me at all hours of the night. He knew how my brain worked and wanted to keep track of me not only professionally, but personally as well. So it was not surprising that when I got home at eight in the morning that I found him waiting on the stoop of my brownstone drinking a cup of coffee. There was a similar sized cup for me.

“Hey.” I yawned, flopping down beside him.

One eyebrow rose quizzically. I knew already: he needed to know what was going on with me and Ryan Dean. He had to know how that would affect me and therefore him.

“Screw you, Vega,” I grumbled, getting up, taking my coffee with me, and walking toward my front door.

“I’m just asking.” He chuckled behind me. “I mean, c’mon, it’s not every day you find out your best friend is sleeping with a hot model.”

I looked at him over my shoulder.

“That’s what my wife says.”

I grunted.

“So,” Cash said as he followed me into my apartment,

“what’s your deal with him? You guys gonna date now? Do gay men date or just fuck on the first date and move in together and live happily ever after?”

“That one.” I smirked at him.

“I figured,” he said. “Oh, nice watch.”

I looked down at Ryan’s blue Rolex on my wrist. “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Cash gave me a look. “Really nice.”

I shrugged.

“So whose watch is it?” he asked, smiling evilly.

“It’s Ryan’s.”

“Is it?”

“Jesus, when did you turn into such a girl?”

“I’m just asking.”

“Why?”

“Maybe we could have dinner tonight,” he suggested casually. “Me, you, Phoebe, and Ryan.”

“I dunno if that—”

“Why not? You got other plans already?”

I had no idea what I was going to be doing, but whatever it was, it would involve Ryan Dean.

I had tried to leave silently that morning, but when I was dressed and walking by the bed, Ryan had reached out and stopped me with a hand in mine. I had let him pull me down beside him on the bed, my fingers raking through his hair, pushing it back from his face so I could see his eyes.

“Go back to sleep,” I soothed him. “I’ll see ya later.” I wasn’t looking forward to catching a cab at seven in the morning, but it had been more than worth it.

“I’ll drive you,” he said, not really awake, his voice full of gravel.

It would be evil to make him do that when he could stay there and sleep. “No, at least one of us should be warm in bed.”

“Why are you even up?”

“I gotta meet Cash and go into the office for a little while.”

He reached over to his nightstand, picked up his watch, and passed it to me. “Here, take this with you, okay?”

“Why?”

“Just take it, okay? Just wear it.”

“Ry, I have my own watch. I just forgot to—”

“I want it to go with you.”

“Listen, I’m gonna see you later whether I’ve got something of yours or not.”

“Okay,” he said, but he didn’t sound convinced.

“Ryan, I—”

“I just want you to wear something of mine, all right?

What’s the big deal?”

“No big deal,” I assured him, snapping the Rolex onto my wrist. “Kiss me.”

He sat up, and I leaned in and kissed him. I meant to just give him a quick peck, but he tasted too good and went all willing and panting on me, and before I realized what I was doing, I had him flat on his back with my tongue shoved halfway down his throat. When I pulled back, I saw how clouded his eyes were, how heavy-lidded, how full of me.

“Kiss me again.”

I smiled slowly. “I gotta go.”

He grabbed a fistful of the front of my T-shirt. “Stay.”

“I hafta go. If I don’t see Cash today, Monday’s gonna be hell.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat. I kissed him again, slower, with more of my tongue.

“God,” he groaned when I pulled back. It was obvious he was excited.

“So I’ll see ya later.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “You’ll call me, tell me where to meet you?”

“Yes.”

“What time?”

“Six,” I said without hesitation.

His smile was lazy. “Okay. Call me and give me directions.”

“But I need to get your—”

“I programmed my number into your phone last night.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“While you were sleeping.”

“When was I sleeping?” I asked because it couldn’t have been for long.

He reached out and grabbed my T-shirt again, holding tight. “For the little time I could let you.”

“Why weren’t you asleep?”

“I was watching you,” he said, grinning sheepishly. “You look good next to me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He swallowed hard, taking a quick breath, his eyes searching mine, checking for hesitation. “So for sure, I’ll see you later, right?”

I heard the worry in his voice; he was unsure of me, as though I would walk out of his apartment and never call.

Like “that guy” could ever be me. I leaned down close to him, my mouth hovering over his. “You’ll see me later,” I promised him.

His eyes closed for a second, and I watched his jaw clench tight. “Julian, please just stay here and—”

“You want me back inside you?”

His body jerked in reaction to the question I had asked as I licked up the side of his throat.

“Please....”

I didn’t make him beg me.

“*Hey!* ”

I looked over at Cash, blinking away the memories.

“What’s with you this morning?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

He crossed the room to stand in front of me. “I think the gym first and then work.”

“Fine, I think that’ll help clear my head anyway.”

“Why isn’t it clear?”

“I dunno. I think I need to sleep.”

“You didn’t sleep last night?”

No, I had sex all night with a man who couldn’t seem to get enough of me.  
“Lemme grab my stuff, and we’ll go.”

He reminded me not to forget my laptop.

AFTER working out and showering, Cash and I were having lunch at an outdoor café we both liked. He was answering e-mail on his phone while I was working on layouts on my laptop when my knee was nudged under the table.

I looked up at Cash, and his eyes flicked behind me.

Turning in my seat, I was stunned to see my ex, Mitch Carmichael. I had not seen him in over six months, and suddenly, there he was.

“Julian,” he said quietly, stepping closer to the table.

I rose, smiling at him, shoving my hands down into the pockets of my jeans. I never knew what to do with my hands when I couldn’t touch people, and I could not touch Mitch Carmichael... at least not in public. It was the reason we had broken up. Since we were more than friends, I had wanted people to know that, and because of his family, it was out of the question.

“I was going to call you,” he said defensively his eyes moving from me to my best friend. “But I never could quite get up the nerve. Hey, Cash how are you?”

“I’m great.” Cash forced a smile. “Did you know Julian’s dating Ryan Dean now?”

I shot Cash a look.

“What?”

I rolled my eyes and walked around Mitch, moving inside fast, making my way to the bar. Once he joined me, I turned to face him.

“Sorry about Cash.”

“He hates me,” Mitch said, his eyes roaming all over me, up and down, not missing anything. “But he has a right to.

The way I left... I had no choice, Julian.”

“Sure.”

He stepped in close to me, leaning on the bar. “Like I said, I was going to call you, but I just... and I remembered us coming here a lot and how much you liked it, so I figured sooner or later if I was here that you’d show up.” It was a long, rambling, nervous explanation. “I should have called.”

“It’s fine,” I assured him. “Everything’s fine.”

He lifted his hand like he was going to touch me. It hovered close to my cheek, but then he glanced around and dropped it.

“So you’ve been back for a while, then?” I asked politely, not caring at all.

“Yeah... no, I... Ryan Dean?”

I found that I couldn’t suppress the smile. “Yeah.”

He nodded. “So is it serious?”

I scowled at him. “What do you want, Mitch?”

The muscles in his jaw corded as he stepped closer to me. “I miss you.”

There had been a time when his words would have meant something to me, but it felt like years had passed instead of a pile of weeks. Five months of him being gone before I started dating Channing Isner, six since I’d laid eyes on the man.

“Julian?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry about?”

“That you still care.”

His eyes locked on mine. “You’re saying you don’t?”

“I’m saying that if you wanna hang out... we can try, but any more than that, I don’t want to do. You didn’t want us to be more than friends, and now I don’t either,” I finished, turning to go.

“Wait,” he said, reaching out to put a hand on my bicep.

“I never said I didn’t want to be with you. What I said was that I needed time for my family to accept me being gay.”

But time was not the issue. There was no way for him to ever live as a gay man with a partner instead of a wife. His family could not accept him that way, and they were not only the people who loved him but also the people he worked with. He was in business with his father in one of the largest commercial construction companies in northern California.

He had pledged his heart to me at the same time as making sure we were never seen together in public even once. I had wondered where my self-respect had gone. I was just too healthy to be anyone’s dirty little secret on the side. I wanted to be on the Christmas card with somebody. I deserved to be.

“Would you come by my place?” he asked under his breath.

“No.” I gave him a slight smile, raising my head, looking into those pale blue eyes of his. They were so big and expressive. It was the first thing I had ever noticed about him. He was staring at me, his jaw set, his body rigid.

“C’mon, Jules, don’t make me beg.”

“I won’t,” I said flatly. “I’m not coming over.”

“Can I come over to your place?”

“No.”

“But I want to talk to you in private,” he said, his hand tightening on my arm, holding on. “I could stay the night.”

I rolled my shoulder and stepped back at the same time so he had no choice but to let go. “I gotta go; me and Cash have got a shitload of work to do before Monday. We both got promoted, so we’re excited but buried, ya know?”

“Oh sure, I just thought—”

“So as soon as I come up for air, I’ll give you a call.” I wanted him to hear me, hear the buddy vibe I was giving him, the overture of friendship.

“Julian,” he said softly, “I just want to spend some time with you—I need to —”

“Hey,” Cash said as he stepped in beside me. “I hate to cut the begging short, but we’ve got a shitload of work to do today so we can get off in time for our double-date.”

“You know, Cash,” Mitch began, “you don’t have to be a prick all the time.”

He shrugged. “To you I do. What kind of a friend would I be if I wasn’t?”

“The thing with me and Julian is more compli—”

“It isn’t complicated,” I cut him off. “I get it. You can’t be gay, and you have your reasons, and I would never judge you for that. I would never ask you to come out for me, Mitch, but you can’t ask me to be in for you. You understand?”

“Asshole,” Cash said under his breath.

I looked at him. “Go back to the table.”

“No, let’s go,” he scowled, gesturing at Mitch. “This is done. You don’t need to make everything better all the fuckin’ time. Sometimes shit just ends, and it’s bad, and that’s how it is, Jules.”

“Charming.”

“You love me,” Cash teased, waggling his eyebrows. And I did, even though he was kind of an ass.

“Julian,” Mitch said, “can we just talk?”

I looked back at him. “Let’s wait awhile, maybe down the road, but not now. I’ll call you, all right?”

“He’ll call,” Cash closed for me. “Bye, Mitch.”

And as Cash and I walked back to our table to collect our things, I had the overwhelming feeling that I would never see Mitch Carmichael again. And it was sad but also inevitable. Mitch needed someone to be in the closet with him, and I had never even seen the inside of one.

I CALLED Ryan around two and told him to meet me at my office that night. He didn’t pick up, but I got his voice mail and left a message. I got a text back fifteen minutes later saying that he would be there. When Cash and I were walking out at six, we found Ryan in the lobby of our office sitting on one of the couches, head back, eyes closed, looking like he belonged on a photo shoot instead of waiting to have dinner. He had on dark brown plaid pants with shiny brown boots, a dress belt, and a brown and black cashmere turtleneck. The tight black leather-racing jacket completed the outfit. I took a deep breath when I saw him, that possessive feeling hitting me hard. Like: that’s mine. He belongs to me.

“Hey,” I said, deliberately using a low voice, rousing him.

His head came up, and I realized he’d been asleep. It took a second for him to focus. “Oh, hey.” He smiled, and his eyes glowed as he stood up. He raked his fingers through his hair before he walked over to me. He stopped just short of touching. There were other people walking around—not just Cash and I worked weekends—and I watched his eyes take them all in.

I leaned forward, put a hand on the back of his neck, and pulled him close to give him a quick kiss on the mouth.

When I stepped back I saw how huge his smile was.

“So, we’re gonna go eat,” I said simply.

“Okay.” Cash smiled wide, offering Ryan his hand.

“Cash,” Ryan said, clearing his throat, taking my partner’s hand but having trouble looking away from me.

“It’s good to see you again.”

“And you.”

“You ready to go eat?” I asked Ryan. He nodded like he was in a daze.

“Thanks for being here like you said ya would.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that,” he said seriously, looking me straight in the eye. “That’s a given.”

“So hey,” Cash said, grabbing hold of Ryan and I, one of his arms draped over each of our shoulders, “you like Mexican, Ry?”

He turned to look at Cash. “I do.”

“Great,” he said, leaning on me, “’cause Jules and I have a favorite place.”

“Well, then, take me.” That he wanted to be included, that he liked Cash, it meant a lot. “I can’t wait to see Phoebe again.” And I saw Cash’s smile, the real one, because Ryan was crazy about the person Cash loved more than anything in the world.

“I think this is gonna work out just fine,” Cash said, giving me his blessing as he dropped his arm off me when we reached the elevator.

He didn’t let go of Ryan and that was nice. When Cash liked you, he touched you. It was the way he was raised. I liked him liking Ryan.

I got stuck sitting in the back of Ryan’s Jeep, and when we stopped at Cash’s condo, we had to wait outside for him to collect his wife. Phoebe had forbidden Cash from bringing Ryan in over the phone. Once the place was immaculate, he could visit.

“You know we didn’t have to do this tonight,” I told Ryan from the backseat.

He turned around to look at me. “Are you kidding? Your partner, his wife... are you high?”

I smiled at him. “I’m not following you at all.”

“Oh, man, c’mon, that’s gravy. Women love me. I mean love-love-love-love-love me! So once Phoebe is crazy about me and after that little display a second ago—I’m golden.”

I grinned at him.

“Don’t look at me like I rode the short bus to school. I’ve got this wired.”

“I still don’t—”

“You just kissed me where you work in front of your friend. No one has ever done that before. I could never be around long enough to... and you—you didn’t even think about it; you just did it, like it was the most natural thing.”

I shrugged. “I guess I’m not getting the significance.”

“No, you’re not, but that’s okay.”

“Ry—”

“Last night when I was with you and your friends and your boss, and then just now... why was I even worried?”

“Why were you worried?”

His eyes were locked on mine. “You don’t get it right now, but you will.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, his bottom lip trembling.

His eyes, I noticed, were sparkling in the light. “So you wanna maybe gimme a kiss? I missed you today.”

I patted my thighs. “Come sit in my lap.”

“Don’t tease.” His eyes narrowed in half.

When I leaned forward, he met me eagerly, his lips parting under mine, my tongue sweeping inside his mouth, tasting him. Phoebe’s greeting made me ease back, and I smiled against his mouth when he leaned with me, whimpering, wanting to prolong the contact.

“Julian,” he breathed, his eyes unfocused like he was drunk.

“I missed you too,” I told him.

It was nice that just my words made him catch his breath. I could get used to Ryan Dean wanting me.

THE stroll after dinner was nice. As I walked beside Cash toward the ice cream parlor at midnight, we looked ahead at Ryan and Phoebe, arm in arm, whispering, leaning against each other as they walked. The way Phoebe looked up at him, the way he tilted his head down to listen to her, it was nice. They had instant chemistry, and they both liked chocolate ice cream with strawberries. It was a very good night.

Ryan drove me home and got out, grabbing my laptop bag from the back seat, slinging it over his shoulder. I noticed that he had a small duffel as well.

“What’s that?”

“My clothes for the morning.”

“You just assume you’re coming up?”

“Oh yeah,” he said quickly, his smile wicked. “I’m sleeping in your bed tonight.”

My apartment was a cluttered mess compared to his, but in a lived-in way, not in a scary, reality TV kind of way.

And with a few hours’ work, it always looked good. He liked that the floors were wood, that I had only a radiator for heat, that I had a hurricane lamp in

the living room, and that there were framed pictures everywhere you looked. The black burlap couch in the living room, vintage bullfighting posters on the walls, the exposed red brick wall by the front door, the mermaid mural I had painted in the bathroom, the Chinese lantern in my kitchen, the hammock on my fire escape, my black teak wood furniture... he told me he liked all my things. He sat in the rocking chair that used to belong to my grandmother, an Adirondack chair that never ceased to look out of place, and took a look at my computer.

After a moment he rendered his verdict. "It's a Mac. Who owns a Mac?"

"Us creative types," I teased.

He looked at all the framed photographs on the shelves with all my books, checked my fridge's inside for food and outside for more photos. I had several pictures of my brother Frank, my folks, Cash and Phoebe, and all my friends' kids, and postcards from my ex-boyfriend Evan who was backpacking through Europe. There were clippings and my horoscope and a recipe for pot roast that I hadn't gotten around to trying, and everything was held on just barely with poetry magnets. If you slammed the door too hard, things always fell off.

"You know you're supposed to create haikus and sonnets with these words. You're not supposed to just use them to keep stuff up."

"How's a haiku go again?" I asked.

He laughed and continued his walk through. "You have more stuff framed than anybody I know. What is this?"

I walked up behind him, looking over his shoulder. "Oh, it's a doodle my friend Melina did on a Post-it note."

"And it's framed?"

I defended it. "It's a good doodle."

"What's it of?"

“You can see it’s a church.”

“I can?”

“Sure.”

He pointed to something else. “And that?”

“It’s the first leaf I found when I came to the city.”

“A leaf?” He chuckled.

“Yeah. I asked for a sign that I was supposed to stay here, and a green leaf fell on my head.” He just looked at me.

“A green leaf,” I repeated, so he’d get the significance. “Why would a new green leaf fall from a tree?”

He smiled at me. “I don’t know, but I’m sure you do.”

“To show me that my life was supposed to grow here.”

“It’s not green anymore.”

“So not the point.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you’re nuts.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged, yawning, walking back to the kitchen. “You want something to drink?”

He shook his head, looking at everything else on my wall. “I love all this crap.”

“Crap?” I asked before drinking orange juice from the carton.

“Gross, man, get a glass,” he said, walking out of the room.

I smiled after him. When I didn't see him for a minute, I went looking and found him standing in my bedroom.

"What?"

"Nice."

"Antique brass bed."

"I know," he said, and then he turned to look at me.

"Ask a question?"

"Sure."

He pointed at the bed. "Why?"

"I like stuff you wouldn't expect."

"Okay."

I shrugged. "I know my place is kinda weird. I—"

"I love your place," he said, cutting me off, taking a quick breath like he was nervous "It's got a nice feel in here.

It feels like home."

Good that he was comfortable, since my plan was for him to spend a lot of time with me. I told him that, and then I reached for him.

"Yeah? You wanna spend time with me?"

"I do." I smiled at him, and he shivered once as I hugged him to me, my hands sliding up and down his back. "Is that what you want, Ry?"

The noise he made in the back of his throat, part whimper, part sigh, clutching at me so tight, answered over and over that it was all he wanted.

And the fact that he was honest, holding nothing back, made me want him even more.

I had thought that maybe the first time was a fluke.

That so much ease and chemistry wasn't really possible with a brand new lover. Usually there was the fumbling and awkward moments of the learning process, getting to know what the other person liked or didn't. But with him, there was ease right away, and lots of laughter and enthusiastic encouragement. I felt free to just be myself, let him see that I was a big dope, and tell him that everything about him was heaven. And I didn't just hear him when he said I felt good in his arms, I actually listened. Because when he looked at me, I knew he meant it.

He had to be close to me. My skin next to his, he said, was a necessary thing. His words were halting, his eyes searched mine, and his breath caught when I kissed him.

There was no mistaking that he wanted me, his hands on me constantly giving him away. It was terrifying to think of us being in the same exact place, wanting the same things. I was more excited than I'd ever been. I couldn't wait to see what was going to happen next.

# V

WHEN I rolled over onto my back on Sunday morning, I was surprised that I wasn't mauled. I wanted to be mauled, so I opened my eyes to figure out why I wasn't. The piece of paper cut into the shape of a heart taped to the lamp on the nightstand stood out right away. He had gone to get coffee and bagels and lox and eggs and apples. All this was on the note in his big, fluid handwriting, along with a promise of all kinds of carnal pleasures as soon as he returned. I hoped he was already on his way home. I was getting used to having him around. I was looking forward to a long, leisurely morning when I thought I heard something shatter.

"Ry?" I called out.

No answer.

I raised my voice, making it carry. "Ry?"

The bang shook my wall, and I gasped. It sounded like something heavy had hit it. A second later, frames rattled loose from their hooks when something slammed against it from the other side. Family photos hit the wooden floor and cracked, sending pieces of metal, frame, and glass in every possible direction.

Moving fast, I reached under my bed, grabbed the baseball bat there, then rolled to my feet, and charged out into my living room. The second I recovered from my shock, I yelled, "What the hell is going on?"

Two men held Ryan against the kitchen wall, and two more clustered around them, but that wasn't the scary, weird, or upsetting thing. The freaky part was their eyes when they turned to look at me.

They all had eyes that looked like they were filled with blood. And not simply pupils that were red like an anime character, but the entire eye filled with wet, welling gore. It was gross and disturbing and twisted my stomach into knots. Had I not seen it for myself, I would have never believed it was

possible for people to be alive and look like that. I had no frame of reference for what I was looking at.

My intrusion allowed Ryan to twist free, leap up onto my counter, and then dive over the hands that reached for him.

I just stood there, frozen, watching as he rolled to his feet in front of me, grabbed the bat from my hand, and turned on the men charging toward him.

He shoved me back and swung. I had never seen anything like the blur of speed that he was. The leap up into the air and the spinning kick that threw the first man across the room, crashing into the kitchen table, backed me up several feet. The way Ryan moved, fast, inhumanly fast, like a coiled snake, a blur of motion lost to the eye, was terrifying. And when the men fell, they didn't stop at the floor—but disappeared, as though sucked into the ground that, for just a second, turned into almost an open airlock. I heard the howling wind, saw how fast and hard they were pulled, the suction fierce, their cries and screams drowned.

The second the room was clear, Ryan was in front of me.

He wasn't even breathing hard.

“Jules.”

I took a step away from him, taking in everything I had just seen, gauging my senses, making sure I was awake, sane, whole.

“Julian.” His voice cracked as he took a step forward.

I lifted my hand, holding him where he was.

“Julian,” he repeated my name.

My eyes flicked to his.

“I have to go right now, but I want to come back. Can I come back?”

I had no idea what to say to him.

“Please.”

After a moment, I nodded.

He winced. “I don’t want to go, but I have to let them know.”

I wanted to ask a question, the first of many, but suddenly there was thunder in the room. The floor dropped out from beneath my feet. I was standing for seconds before I was falling into a funnel of wind. I was surrounded by sound, like a jet engine, and the air was hot, scalding, burning my skin. I was tumbling, spinning, rolling, terrified of what was going to happen when I stopped.

Then arms around me, warm, solid, strong, and when I focused my eyes, there was Ryan. Tears were swept from his face, his hair blown back in the gale. He was trying to speak, but I couldn’t hear him.

“I don’t understand,” I yelled, not even hearing my own voice in the wind.

He let me go suddenly, releasing me fast, and I was surprised that I didn’t just fly away, instead remaining just as close as we plummeted together. The ringing in my ears that became a pulse of overwhelming sound hit me hard, pounding me into unconsciousness.

MY EYES drifted open, and when I turned my head, I saw the man... men. There were five of them there, one sitting on the coffee table close to me, the other four standing.

“Julian Nash,” the man closest to me said.

I scrambled to sit up, staring at them all and taking in the tailored suits and dress shoes, as well as the fact that none of them were wearing ties. I felt strange there on my couch in only sweatpants.

“I am Jael,” the man told me, “sentinel of the city. The men with me are Jaka, Marot, Malic, and Leith, my warders.”

Warders. I had no idea what that was. More to the point, I was actually awake. Really, truly, awake.

Leaping to my feet, I walked backward until I hit the front door. The cool wood against my back was comforting.

“Julian,” Jael began, “I—”

“Jesus Christ,” I gasped, trying really hard not to hyperventilate. “When I woke up before, and I came out of the bedroom and there were—were, those things and—and what the fuck were those things?”

“Verdant demons,” they all answered at once.

“Verdant demons, right.” I took a breath, dragging my fingers through my short wavy hair. “Okay, so like I said, the first time I figured, bad chicken or something, ya know? I’m dreaming or having my stomach pumped somewhere, or God knows what, but now—” I looked up, my eyes roaming the room, seeing Ryan first and then the other five men “Now I’m thinking I’m not dreaming, and I’m awake, and I had demons in my kitchen.”

“You’re very much awake,” Jael soothed. “And your sanity has not deserted you, Julian Nash. You’re not mad.

Sentinels and warders exist to protect man from all the creatures from the pit. We stand between you and the abyss.”

“Dramatic,” I coughed, “and I’m normally up for that, but—why the hell were there demons in my kitchen?” I finished with a roar.

“They followed Rindahl to your home.”

Rindahl.

“You call him Ryan.”

My eyes flicked to the man I was crazy about. I saw how wounded he looked, his eyes wet and pleading.

“Look at me.”

I had to turn back to Jael, who I realized now was just massive. With him sitting down, we were almost eye to eye.

Standing, he would have towered over me. “What’s a verdant demon?” I asked.

Jael frowned. “I don’t understand. What class of demon?”

I made a noise in the back of my throat; I had no idea what I was even asking.

“Verdant demons cluster together in one place. They have an almost hive mentality. They are as vicious in battle as they are well-trained and synchronized.” He looked at me intently. “What else would you like to know?”

I had just received the Wikipedia answer to my verdant demon inquiry. Christ, the whole thing was absurd. “That’s not what I meant,” I scoffed, hovering between yelling until I felt better and thinking I was dreaming. Everything I knew had been changed in an instant.

“Julian—”

“I’m losing my mind,” I said, closing my eyes, concentrating on breathing, counting. I needed things to be normal just as I had an inkling that they never would be again.

“Listen to—”

My eyes snapped open. “Who the hell are you? Why are in my house? And what the hell is a sentinel?”

Jael’s eyes glinted, but there was nothing else. “Rindahl has chosen well.”

I put out my arm, braced myself on the wall to my right, and focused on taking deep in and out breaths.

“Mr. Nash?”

“Every city has a sentinel?” I asked him, breath in, breath out.

“Yes,” he answered softly.

“And every sentinel has five warders?”

“Like the fixed points of a pentagram, yes.”

“Warders do what?”

“The same thing as a sentinel. We all fight creatures, demons, but the sentinel is the oldest, has seen the most action, and so, is in charge.”

I absorbed what he’d said, added it to things I knew, facts, trivia, names. Every city had a sentinel; a man who made sure that creatures like verdant demons didn’t get me.

Okay.

“Jules?” My eyes flicked to Ryan. “Can I talk to you now?”

“Are you alright?” I asked, and even I could hear the worry in my voice.

His eyes locked on mine, but he didn’t move. He looked like he was in pain.

“Come here,” I demanded.

“Julian, I—”

“Now.”

He rushed across the room to me. When he was close enough, I grabbed him and pulled him into my arms. I hugged him tight, letting out a deep breath.

“Christ, I thought those guys were gonna kill you,” I said, leaning back to look at his face. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re like a ninja or something?” The gasp of air, the stunned look on his face. I had to smile. “Now I get the

swords and the weird herbs and your Jeep all beat to shit all the time. Can't paint your baby if it's just gonna get scratched up."

"God, Julian, you're amazing."

"I need a second to process this, okay?"

"You're not frightened?"

"I don't know what I am yet," I confessed, feeling Ryan's warm hands slide over my back. "You gotta let me think."

"Jules."

"Wait."

"Julian, you—"

"Wait," I snapped, before chuckling at how absurd everything was. "We'll talk as soon as we're alone."

I heard his quick intake of breath. "You're not sending me away?"

"Why would I wanna do that?" I scowled automatically, turning to face the men, tucking Ryan behind me. It was stupid considering he was fresh from having subdued four men, but he brought out every protective instinct I had. He belonged to me. "Put your hands back on me so I know you're there."

He didn't just touch me; he leaned into me, pressing against my back, his arms wrapping around me tight. I felt his stubbled cheek between my shoulder blades and the shudder that tore through him.

"Listen to me, Julian Nash."

My eyes returned to the man who rose and rose from the coffee table, huge, easily seven feet tall, dark green eyes staring at me.

"I am Jael Ezran, and as I said, these are my men. We hunt and kill things that if I told you about, you would think I was nuts."

I tracked him with my eyes, watching as he walked around the couch only to stop a couple of feet away.

“A sentinel,”—he put his hand on his heart—“that’s me, has a team of five warders who hunt with him, or sometimes on their own, in teams. Normally, things like the creatures you saw earlier would not come to the home of a warder, as our homes are sealed, but your house, as it is not Rindahl’s—Ryan’s—house, it is not sealed. He is not supposed to remain overnight anywhere but his own home, but I suspect he was distracted by the discovery of your new bond and so neglected his own safety as well as yours.”

“Our bond? You lost me.”

He nodded, gave me a slight smile. “Every sentinel, every warder, has to have a hearth: a home, a channel for safety, peace, love, whatever you want to call it. A warder must have a hearth or eventually they die. We have found over the centuries that all power and no heart will kill a warder. There has to be balance between the emotional and the physical. Without balance, there’s chaos within. Do you understand?”

“I don’t think so,” I told him honestly.

“All right,” he sighed, “think of it like this. I fight evil. I kill horrible vicious things, but to do that, I have to be prepared. I have to be ready physically, emotionally, and mentally to take life every single day.”

I realized suddenly how he looked tired but determined at the same time.

“I can train myself, as well as my men, to be strong physically and be focused mentally, but the heart—that’s not in my power to do for anyone but myself.”

“Course,” I agreed. I was mostly following. I wasn’t sure why I was receiving the explanation, but if he felt the need for the exposition, I would hear him out.

He nodded, rubbing at his thick dirty-blond hair. “We all protect each other. We are all dependent for our very survival on one another. If one of us is distracted and their thoughts are on what they want or need instead of on the fight...someone could die.”

It made sense. Men in battle had to be focused on the task at hand. “I don’t understand why you’re tell—”

“My men protect me and each other, and to do that, they need a balance in their lives. For a warder, their hearth—home—is vital and necessary.” I stayed quiet not wanting to interrupt. “A hearth makes a home for the warder. There are very few men or women that can be a hearth to a warder as the warder’s energy drains the life force of most humans.”

“So what you’re saying is that the bad has to be offset by the good, by the love of the hearth.”

His smile made his laugh lines crinkle and elicited a heavy sigh. “Usually after the first time a warder and a human share a bed, the warder wakes to find their partner withered, years burned away in a single moment of shared bliss.”

“It ages people, sleeping, having sex with a warder.”

“Yes.”

Which was why Ryan had so thoroughly looked me over after the first night we made love: he had been checking to make sure he hadn’t hurt me.

“If the warder leaves, then the partner will recover their years, given time, but if the warder remains, even out of love, the woman, or man, will die.”

“Sounds like a succubus.”

“There are both female and male warders, so stories of incubus and succubus, a night hag, all of these myths can be attributed in some way to warders.”

“What if the warder chooses to stay with the person they love, but they just never have sex again?”

“Just their presence alone would drain their partner once they’re joined for the first time.”

I flashed him a grin. “It’s a helluva excuse to sleep around: gotta look for your hearth and all. It’s not a one-night stand, it’s just research.” His eyes narrowed, and I chuckled. “Sorry, go on.”

“You’re very odd.”

Pot to kettle in my opinion, but I shut up since he was much bigger than me and a whole hell of a lot scarier. “But what does any of this have to do with me?”

“Don’t you know?”

Before I could respond, Ryan tugged on my hand, prodding me to follow him. “C’mon,” he urged, pulling me after him out of the living room and into my bedroom. He shoved me down hard on the bed.

Looking up at him, I saw all the emotions swimming across his face, and his jaw muscles were cording hard. “So?

I guess the other night when I held you down you really—”

“No,” he cut me off, sounding pained, his eyes a mess.

“Don’t look at me like I’m scary.”

“But you are.”

“Not to you.”

I was having so much trouble wrapping my brain around him as a monster killer. He looked the same, like Ryan.

“I need, I want—you have to be the... the one who says, who does.”

I wasn't stupid; it just took me a second because my day had been a little weird. "Why would you submit to me? Why would you want to?"

"Because then I have no power, and I can just be." So he didn't have to think if he was surrendering up all his control to me. He just had to feel. "Don't send me away," he whispered. "Please, Jules. I just—" he took a sharp breath

"—realized it was you."

And I understood. He had always liked me, but something had changed, and he had really seen me for the first time.

"I'm sorry I was stupid. My instincts have been wrong before, and I've hurt people. I don't trust myself like I should.

Jael hates it."

He had to be ready on a moment's notice to make a life or death decision and not wonder if what he was doing was right or wrong. If I were Jael, I would have been just as frustrated.

"Please don't send me away."

I stared up into his beautiful eyes. "Ry—"

"I want to be the one you take. I need to be the guy you dominate and hold down. Don't," he almost yelled, and I heard the panic in his voice. "Don't let it be anybody else."

He was trembling, and it sunk into me then, that for him, this was much more than us deciding whether we were going to keep seeing each other. He had bigger concerns.

Wounded eyes locked on mine. "I'm so sorry for all this.

I never thought I would be tracked. I'm not as valuable as the others."

But Jael hadn't mentioned any hierarchy; he had said *his* warders, like they were all equal. I was betting that Ryan's enemies saw them all the same way.

"Is it really Ryan, or do you prefer Rindahl?"

He cleared his throat. "When I was made a warder at fifteen I was given that name. I hate it. It's not who I am.

Ryan, Ry... that's who I am."

The age stuck in my head. "Where are your parents?"

"I never had any; my mother died in childbirth and there's no father listed anywhere. Her last name was Dean, and she told a nurse she wanted to name me Ryan before she went into labor. It's the story I was told. I don't even know if it's true or not."

"And the others?"

"We're all the family any of us have. Jael said that's how it's always been."

"That's why you all need a hearth to come home to."

He nodded. "I want to come home to you, Julian, if you let me."

I opened my arms for him. "Come here."

The tears in his eyes came fast, welling up as he dived down into my arms, face buried in the hollow of my throat.

My fingers sank into his thick blond mane as I felt his mouth open on the side of my neck. "So how does it work, reality talk show host by day, scary kick-ass warder by night? When the hell do you sleep?"

He smiled. I felt it as he kissed over my skin. "I don't wanna sleep. I wanna make love to you. Please, Julian."

"Tell me."

“Okay, yeah.” He nibbled down the side of my neck to my collarbone. “I live two complete and separate lives that need to be connected. That’s the part Jael left out, the connection. If you’re not grounded in the real world, the day-to-day existence of a regular man, you lose your mind. I’ve seen it happen to a lot of warders over the years.”

“So this team is not your original one.”

“No.”

“Because sometimes a warder just freaks out,” I clarified.

“Yes.”

“And you avoid that by having your hearth make a home for you, provide a life for you that has nothing to do with hunting and killing creatures of the night.”

He snickered at my wording. “Exactly.”

“So you really do need a hearth.”

He leaned back to look up at me. “I need you, Julian.”

“It’s like Buffy.”

The scowl was instant and dark. “I’m sorry?”

“You’re like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, ya know, Buffy.

She patrols. She kills things. She’s hot. She wears cute clothes... you’re Buffy.”

He exhaled fast. “I will give you a half a second to—”

“And the guys are like the Scooby Gang,” I teased, patting his ass. “Huh, honey?”

His growl was loud as I dissolved in a fit of relieved laughter. He sat up, yanked the pillow out from under my head, and smacked me hard across the face with it.

“You shit!” he yelled. “Here I am thinkin’ you’re making a life and death decision for me, and you’ve already decided that you’re gonna keep me! What the fuck?”

I could not have stopped laughing if my life depended on it.

He came back down on top of me, pinning me to the bed, his mouth sealing over mine, breathing me in and kissing me hungrily. I rolled him to his back and broke the kiss, sitting up, straddling his hips. His eyes were heavy-lidded as he gazed up at me.

“We get along, I think.”

He ran his hands up and down my thighs. “We more than get along.”

“You realize that between the two of us, you’re the domestic god, right? Not me.”

“It’s not about cooking or cleaning or anything else but having a home, Jules. It’s being with you, knowing that you know everything about me and want me anyway. It’s acceptance and unconditional lo—safety,” he finished haltingly.

I smiled down at him. “Nice save. You can say ‘love’. I won’t freak out.” He trembled beneath me. “I think I could fall in love with you pretty easy.”

“Julian, God, my body is... I need—”

“Whaddya need?” I asked, bending to brush my lips across his.

He wriggled under me, the whimper of want sending a pulse of heat straight to my slowly filling cock. “God, you feel good.”

“You too,” I said, shifting over his groin until he caught his breath.

“Your legs are so hard,” he marveled, his fingers digging into my thighs.

“So is there a secret handshake or some scary ritual?

Do you hafta drink my blood or something?” I asked him.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Becoming your hearth, what’s the process of that?”

“You say: Ryan, I agree to be your hearth.”

“That’s it? That’s really anticlimactic.”

“You want pageantry?”

“Maybe not quite that big, but something.”

His smile was radiant. “You are so great. Do you have any idea how great you are?”

I grunted. “So listen, I want to go with you.” He was distracted, biting his bottom lip, reaching up for my neck. I brushed his hands away. “Promise I can come. I want to see you do it so I know what it’s like for you. I want to know.”

“Mmmm,” he breathed out, hands on my thighs again.

“Kiss me.”

“Ry—swear.”

He took a quivering breath. “You know you’ve got a lot of clothes on.” His voice was husky and deep. “Maybe you should take some of them off.”

“You want me to be your hearth, right?”

“Your skin makes me crazy.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes,” he barely got out. His eyes glazed, the pupils dilated and round.

The way he was looking at me, I wouldn't be able to be logical too much longer. The man burned me up, and we had been together too short a time to be anywhere near sated with each other. I felt my body start to heat. “Ry—”

“Nice piece,” a voice said from behind me.

Whirling around, I was off Ryan and standing beside the bed seconds later. I had not heard the door open, so I was surprised to see the man in the black Armani suit and the Prada boots standing in my bedroom. He was tall, with white blond hair and ice blue eyes. He looked as though he had been carved out of porcelain.

“Get the hell out of my home!” Ryan barked at him, rolling up off the bed, growling.

“It's not your home,” came the crisp accent, not English, something else. “It belongs to the stud. If it was yours, I, along with everyone else, wouldn't have been able to get in here, now would I? Jael was right; you're acting really stupid.”

“What the fuck do you want?” Ryan hissed at him, walking around in front of me, shielding me even though I was bigger than he was.

He smirked, fiddling with his silver cufflinks. “Jael said I had to go out with you tonight. He wants to make certain you don't neglect your duties.”

Ryan scowled at him. “That's bullshit. You're the only one who doesn't trust me. I'm supposed to have Jaka this week, not you.”

“Jaka's too trusting. He would just expect you to give him backup, and then he'd end up dead.”

Ryan moved fast and had the other man pinned to the far wall with a spectral movement of speed. One moment he was beside me, the second he

had his fellow warder pounded against the brick. “I would never jeopardize any of your lives, even yours, Malic!”

The eyes lifted to rest on Ryan’s face. “Even mine?”

He stepped back only to move the bigger man off the wall and ram him back into it again. Malic smiled instead of crying out. It should have hurt. The force exhibited, how the wall shuddered from the impact, it would have cracked my ribs, broken things inside my body.

“Are you seriously considering taking your hearth with you to kill verdant demons tonight? Is that wise?”

“I’m not his hearth yet,” I corrected him.

“Oh the fuck you’re not.” He dismissed me as Ryan stepped away from him, turning his back on him to cross the room. “You’re accepting of us being warders, seeing creatures get sucked into small black holes didn’t flip you out, and you like fucking Rindahl—I can still feel the heat in this room. Tell me, Julian Nash, how are you not his hearth?”

I had no answer. He was a snotty, snarky asshole, and also completely correct. The idea of being Ryan Dean’s touchstone was a hundred percent appealing. I liked to matter. I wanted to matter, and I had a chance to really mean something to a man I found intoxicating. I very much wanted to sign on for the hearth gig.

“You’re right.”

Ryan’s head snapped up, and his eyes met mine. “You mean it?”

I smiled at him. “Yeah, come live with me. It’s what Cash is expecting anyway.”

He took a step forward. “But your whole life will change.”

“I like change, keeps your life from getting stagnant.

And besides, once you live here, you can make the apartment safe, right? I own it, so seal it up or whatever.

Later, when we find a house, you can seal up the new one too.”

“Julian, I—”

“Being a warder’s just one part of you. It’s not all you are. I like the rest of you a helluva lot, always have. We can work out the new avenging angel of the night part.”

He leaped at me, and I was laughing as I grabbed him.

He wasn’t that much smaller than me, and trying to hold him and still keep my balance proved much too difficult. We fell back onto the bed, a tangle of arms and legs.

I lifted his face, bent, and kissed him. The deep, husky moan tore through me as I slanted my mouth over his. My tongue slid between his lips as I took possession of the kiss, letting him know that he was mine.

There was the sound of a throat clearing, and it took every drop of willpower I possessed to break the kiss and look up at the ice-man towering over the bed. But he wasn’t looking at me.

“I ask again, is he going out with us to hunt demons tonight?”

“Yes.” Ryan caught his breath. “He is.”

“And what if he’s killed, what will you do then? You just found your precious hearth. If he dies, who will you fuck then?” The tone of the question was aggressive. He sounded like a jilted lover more than anything else.

“I’ll protect him,” Ryan promised. “I’ll ask Leith, see if he can come help me, or Jaka or Marot. I know you won’t help watch him, but one of them will.”

“I’ll watch him. I would no more allow your hearth to be harmed than any of the others. You insult me by suggesting I would be anything but vigilant.”

Ryan grunted as he rolled off the bed to his feet in one seamless movement. It was like he was boneless.

“This is the one man you’ve found that you can fuck and not kill. Why would I let you lose him?”

I saw Ryan deciding whether he was going to take offense at the other man’s wording. After several moments, he nodded. “I’ll meet you at midnight down by the marina.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Malic agreed, walking out of the room, slamming the bedroom door after him.

“Hey.” He turned around to face me. “What’s with you and him?”

“It was years ago,” he admitted, no game playing between us, no making me dig. “Malic and me, it didn’t work, and two warders together is so much more than simply a bad idea.”

I let out a deep sigh. “I don’t think he’s over you.”

“We’re different men,” he told me. “And we want different things. Maybe as more time passes, Malic will find his own home and hearth, but for now, he has no one and does not seem all that interested in finding one.”

“I thought it was dangerous for warders not to have hearths?”

“It is, so we all watch him, but even Jael can’t force Malic to love someone if he doesn’t or can’t. We may be scary warriors fighting against supernatural forces, but we’re still guys, ya know? If you don’t feel it, you don’t feel it.”

I squinted at him. “So with me, it’s there, right?”

He swallowed hard, looking overwhelmed suddenly.

I opened my arms, and he moved fast to fill them, his head down on my shoulder, hugging me so tight. “Can I ask you a small favor?”

It was funny how he leaned back slowly and peered up at me.

“I promise it’s not a big deal.”

The disbelief was all over his face, and my smile helped nothing. “Oh God, what?”

I softened my request by kissing him so hard and long that he had to shove me off of him so he could breathe. I took advantage of the moment, and he agreed before he realized he’d made a deal with the devil... well, with me.

## VI

“HOW come I don’t have a sword?” Cash asked, looking from Ryan to Malic and back again. Malic did the slow pan to Ryan, who let out a deep breath before looking at me.

“What?”

“Remind me to kill you.”

“Why?” I chuckled, trying not to laugh, but the absurdity of the entire situation was simply too much for me.

I was going to start giggling any second, and I never giggled. I was a grown up, for heaven’s sake.

If Ryan wanted me for his partner, he got Cash too.

There was no way around it. I would not keep the biggest event in my life from my best friend. I explained to Ryan that it was like having a bigger safety net, now he had Cash, and Phoebe, who was not along but dying to know what happened. She was pregnant; she did not get to see demons being killed. Ryan and Malic were stunned at how easy it was for my best friend and his wife to wrap their brains around the fact there were actual things that went bump in the night that had to be destroyed. And Phoebe, like me, who watched every single scary show on the CW and FOX and every horror movie that came out, was very excited to be in on their whole big secret. She was all ready to help make fake IDs, spread salt around doorways, or banish angels back to heaven. She watched way too much *Supernatural*.

“Jules?”

I turned to look at Ryan.

“This is the one and only time you and Cash are allowed here with us. Do you understand?”

I had already made the same promise at least ten times, but I understood that the arrangement was giving him an ulcer. It was really very sweet.  
“Yes, Ry.”

“Could we all please fuckin’ focus?” Malic growled beside me.

My eyes moved to him. We were all crouched behind some stacked pallets at the wharf, looking at the empty space in front of us through the slats.

“What?” he asked irritably.

“Jael calls Ryan ‘Rindahl’, but it’s like his call sign or something, it’s not his name. What’s your real name, Malic?”

“It’s just Malic,” he said between clenched teeth.

“It is.” Cash nodded, bumping my shoulder. “Remember, he owns that strip club that Ben and Carlene did the grand opening for like six months ago. I thought at the time that Malic was a cool-ass name.”

Malic’s cold eyes flicked to Cash, but instead of looking away, Cash stared right back. My money was on my best friend, and it turned out I was right. Malic could not hold his gaze long.

“There,” Ryan said suddenly, his voice guttural and icy.

Before I could caution him to be careful, he stood, and from that standing position, bent his knees and leaped straight up into the air and over the stack we were hiding behind.

“Jesus,” Cash breathed as Malic followed right behind him.

I had expected, from many seasons of *Angel* and everything else, demons with horns, big heads, scaly skin, or fangs. What I saw were men, or things that looked like men, all in black, looking more like assassins than creatures

from the pit. The eyes, though, their bleeding eyes, under the glow from the streetlamps, were a dead giveaway.

I heard Ryan growl low in his throat, and in a blur of movement, he pulled his two swords from the twin scabbards on his back and rushed toward the demons.

Cash roared out a warning as Ryan was quickly surrounded, but he was already moving. As I watched, I was frightened for the man who had become more important with every passing second I spent with him, but it was beautiful at the same time, the synchronization, more a dance than war.

“I’ll cut out your heart,” one of the creatures snarled at Ryan.

“Try, servant, try,” Ryan baited him, the swords spinning in his hands as he lunged forward.

I was breathless watching him. His sword cut through the air in arches and circles, whirling so fast, like a fan, sweeping from side to side, moving in studied steps, intricately executed, each maneuver able to cause instant death if contact were made.

I looked for Malic, found him, and watched as he rolled, leaped, froze still as stone, and then dove into a somersault and landed light on his feet once more. Swords struck one another hard, steel ringing against steel, the only sound on the empty dock. Malic and his adversary stopped suddenly, frozen together in statuesque form. Malic’s body in an arch above the ground, one hand on the dock, splayed fingers gripping the wood, the other holding his sword straight up to ward off the death strike. His adversary was poised above him, driving down with his stroke, his legs braced apart, the other hand filled now with a dagger no one else had seen. He had thought to deliver the last blow, but Ryan’s yell turned the demon’s head at the last moment. The moment of fractured focus was taken full advantage of. Malic collapsed to the ground and somersaulted to his feet in a seamless movement that was like watching a dancer.

I turned to look for Ryan and watched as he sprinted past where Cash and I were and ran up the side of a building with a demon not more than a breath

behind him. I watched as the demon flew after Ryan, both arms outstretched like wings, each wielding a razor sharp weapon meant to take my lover's life.

Ryan spun in mid-air, whipped around, and beheaded the demon instantly. The ground opened up, and just as it had done before in my apartment, there seemed to be a yawning, blowing black hole that sucked the headless corpse down into it. And I saw suddenly where Ryan would complete his leap as well as what he didn't see: the two demons there.

Charging out from behind the pallet with Cash right behind me, I ran up on the creature as Ryan found himself at the end of his strike. The demon adjusted his stance and drove forward, the honed edge of the sword down, ready to cut through Ryan's heart and sever him in two.

I swung hard with the bat I had brought along, catching the demon in the chest, driving him back. Before I could turn, he recovered and charged forward. The sword would have driven through my abdomen, but it was knocked sideways by a three iron. Cash had brought a gold club, and with it, he saved my life.

I watched as he swept the demon's feet out from under, but before I could be impressed, I gasped as I saw an ax arcing toward my best friend's neck.

Caught fast between twin swords, the ax was wrenched free of the demon's hand with such force that I heard a cry of pain. Ryan was there, between Cash and death, and I instinctively grabbed his arm and squeezed it tight.

"Run to the street," he growled at me.

I turned in time to see a flash of steel and watched, spellbound, as the edge of a hatchet stopped inches from my stomach. The flat side of the sword had intercepted the weapon, and as I followed the length of it up to the face of the demon, I found that there was no head to view as it was no longer there. I pushed the carcass away from me before it fell forward, and a stream of thick liquid coursed from the neck stem splattering the wooden dock at my feet. I was bumped sharply out of the way, and I saw beside me

another vacuum of a black hole. Ryan had kept me from being sucked into it.

“Now run,” he ordered, grabbing hold of Cash’s jacket and shoving him forward in front of me.

As I bolted down the dock, Cash pounding after me, I saw Malic rush by me. A safe distance away, both of us turned to look. Malic leaped high in the air, spinning at the same time, and landed effortlessly on the roof of a restaurant before turning on the demons there. Looking for Ryan, I saw him hacking his way through one man after another with his savagely wielded swords, turning living beings to corpses before my very eyes. Those further away began to run instead of standing by, spellbound to meet their fate. I understood their trance-like state, as I myself could not take my eyes from Ryan Dean, riveted, at the same time revolted, bearing witness to the carnage.

I heard a sound behind me, and turning, saw a demon.

Bloody eyes swept over us before he lunged forward. I didn’t have time to register Ryan’s presence before he suddenly stopped just behind the creature, standing still and silent, his body frozen in position. He stood in a lunging stride, right leg forward, one sword held tight in both hands now against his left side, as though he had finished an arc of movement. It took me a moment to realize that he had not missed as I had thought at first.

When the demon tried to speak, blood gushed from his mouth, coursing over his lips and chin in gulping spasms, staining the entire front of his shirt bright crimson. His head fell back in agonizing slowness, opening a gaping wound before falling to the pavement with a sickening wet sound.

The body stood for a moment and then lurched forward into a swirling black wind tunnel. My head lifted, and my eyes met Ryan’s as Malic suddenly appeared at his side.

“Never again,” he said, releasing a deep breath. “But thank you for interfering on my behalf.” The last part was spoken to not only me, but Cash as well.

“Even though you interrupted a killing stroke,” Ryan’s fellow warder groused, glowering at Cash and I. “Neither Rindahl nor I ever take our eyes from one another in battle.”

I looked back at Ryan.

“It’s true,” he said gruffly. “Now I want you and Cash to go home. As we had to intervene here to save you, others escaped, and we have to hunt them down. It’s gonna take a while.”

Malic growled, bumping my shoulder, hard as he stalked by me.

“I’m sorry, Ry,” I exhaled, “I just wanted to know what you did, but me being here put you in danger.”

He didn’t disagree, but I got a hint of a smile before he put his hand briefly on my cheek. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Go home and go to bed, Jules. You have to work in the morning.”

“So do you,” Cash said.

“But I don’t have to be at the museum to tape the date-night piece until nine,” he sighed, brushing by me, following after Malic.

I watched him walk away, flicking his sword sharply so drops of blood flew off of it before he sheathed it across the other on his back. Malic turned to look at him before he took off running. Ryan broke into a sprint, and when Malic leaped high into the air, over the roof of the building he had been on earlier, Ryan followed right on his heels.

“They’re amazing,” Cash spoke my thoughts out loud.

I turned back to my best friend. “Why does Ryan need me if he has Malic?”

Cash pointed at my face. “You’ve got blood splatter on your glasses.”

“Perfect,” I groaned, taking them off to clean the lenses on my T-shirt.

I walked with Cash silently back to his Lexus. Leaning on the open door, one hand resting on the roof of the car, he looked at me.

“What?”

“It seems like Ryan’s got backup when he’s fighting, right?”

I shrugged.

“From what you said earlier about a hearth and what he said when I asked him, seems like the part that you’re gonna do is to recharge his batteries. Just like when I come home from a shitty day at work, and my beautiful wife is there waiting for me with her own story about her own shitty day—

I feel better just looking at her.” He stared at me. “Isn’t it your part to just love him and make everything better?”

I stared back. “You saw that... how do you feel better after that?”

“I dunno how it is with you guys, Jules, but just holding my girl in my arms fixes a helluva lot for me.”

And hadn’t Ryan said as much?

“I’ll think about it.”

“Well, that’s what you do, Jules,” Cash chuckled, getting into the car, “you think.”

Now what the hell did that mean?

He let out a snort of laughter at the look I gave him once I was seatbelted in.

## VII

I GOT no sleep because I was worried about Ryan. I couldn't concentrate at our Monday morning meeting and finally had to excuse myself since I was climbing the walls. I had to go and make sure he was all right.

I was waiting at the elevator to go down, and when the doors swooshed open, found myself face to face with Peyton Wilson.

"Julian." He coughed, flushing bright pink, his ears turning red. "How are... you? I'm so sorry for Friday night and everything. It was a mess."

So much had happened in three days, and the guy I had been seeing having sex with the man in front of me didn't even register as important anymore. "It's fine," I assured him, getting on the elevator as he got off. "Honestly."

He took a breath. "Really?" The man sounded so confused.

"Yes, Peyton, we're good."

"Jesus, Julian," he said, catching the doors so they couldn't close. "You are seriously the coldest son of a bitch I have ever met in my life."

"Could you move?"

"Christ, if I lost a hot piece of ass like Channing Isner, I would feel like shit."

Since I had never had a piece of said ass, I had no idea what I was missing. Not that I cared. "Okay, can you move?"

"Julian, I—"

"How 'bout this: let's not talk ever again," I suggested as I pushed him back and the doors slid shut. I had never anticipated him giving me crap. I had figured him for scared and hopeful that our working relationship would not suffer.

But in the big picture, as he worked for Cash, neither he nor Channing were any of my concern.

Only one thing mattered: Ryan Dean.

I took a cab to his apartment, and when the doorman saw me, remembering me from Friday night, he let me in immediately. I had my hand up to knock on his door when it opened.

“Hey.” Ryan smiled at me, his eyes sparkling with all the kaleidoscope colors I loved, green, brown, and gold, holding up his BlackBerry so I could see it. “I was just gonna call you and—”

I lunged at him, hands on his face, kissing him hard and deep. His moan was hoarse, needy. “I was so worried.”

“Why?” He smiled as I kissed his throat, his chin, his cheeks, his nose, and finally his mouth again, claiming his lips, his tongue. His hands fisted on the lapels of my cashmere trench coat. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth, nibbling it gently.

“Jules, I... need... I hafta be somewhere, and you’re making it really hard to—you’re making me hard.”

I could not get enough of him, knowing he was safe, and the warmth of his body seeping through his clothes. I was rough and bruising as I prolonged the kiss, devouring his sweet mouth until I got the whimper I was after. His arms were wrapped around my neck, and I could feel his heart beating though his dress shirt. We stood together, in his doorway, wrapped around each other, kissing like lovesick teenagers until I finally had to breathe. My head was pounding as I lifted my lips from his.

“Forget what I said,” he said, “you go ahead and worry.”

“I want you to move in today. Hire movers, pack up your shit, and come home. I never want to sleep without you again—not that I did any sleeping.”

He shifted his stance, easing back so he could look into my face. “Yeah, you look a little wrung out,” he said gently, pushing my glasses up on my nose. “Those are hot, you know. Guys who wear glasses, brainy guys, do it for me, big time.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh yes.” He grinned, and I felt his fingers sliding up the back of my neck into my hair. “So how ’bout I pick you up after work, we’ll grab some Chinese food, come here, and get in bed. How would that be?”

“I want you to move in.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow, for sure. Tonight, you hafta sleep over here with me. I need to make sure you’re safe.”

“Okay,” I agreed, pressing wet happy kisses to his throat and jaw.

“God, I needed this,” he sighed, “you coming over here all worried and hot for me.”

“Watching you and Malic last night, I wasn’t sure you—”

“Jules.” He framed my face in his hands, making me still. “Me and Malic, me and all the others... we work great together, the killing is seamless, but that part is just training and ability. A sentinel can find his warders, knows them when he sees them, and when he trains us, it triggers the speed, the strength, the power. Jael finding me made me a warder but that’s all it is. The real part, the true part, is just about being a man and being loved. Having a hearth, a home, that’s who I am, what I am.”

Every doubt I had crumbled with his words. Being loved was the most important thing to Ryan Dean; I would not make him tell me again.

“You’re gonna love me, Julian, sooner than you think.”

I already loved him; I just wasn’t ready to tell him.

Pushing him back through the door, I locked it behind me.

“Mr. Nash, you—”

I grabbed him, pivoted, and shoved him face first up against the front door.

“That’s it... push me around.” This then was Ryan’s need, to feel my strength, my power exerted over him, to trust that I would be rough but never hurt him, my love his safety net. “Do whatever you want to me.”

I loved him shaking with desire, the need there in his voice, his face, his heavy-lidded eyes, and the trembling lower lip. His sharp gasp of pleasure made me smile as I pinned him with my body, his inability to form words, only sounds from deep inside of him, his profile a study in anticipation.

“God, I love belonging to you,” he moaned.

I loved it too. He was mine. “I’m not letting you go.”

“Promise?”

“I do.”

“Say it again.”

So I did.

## About the Author

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.



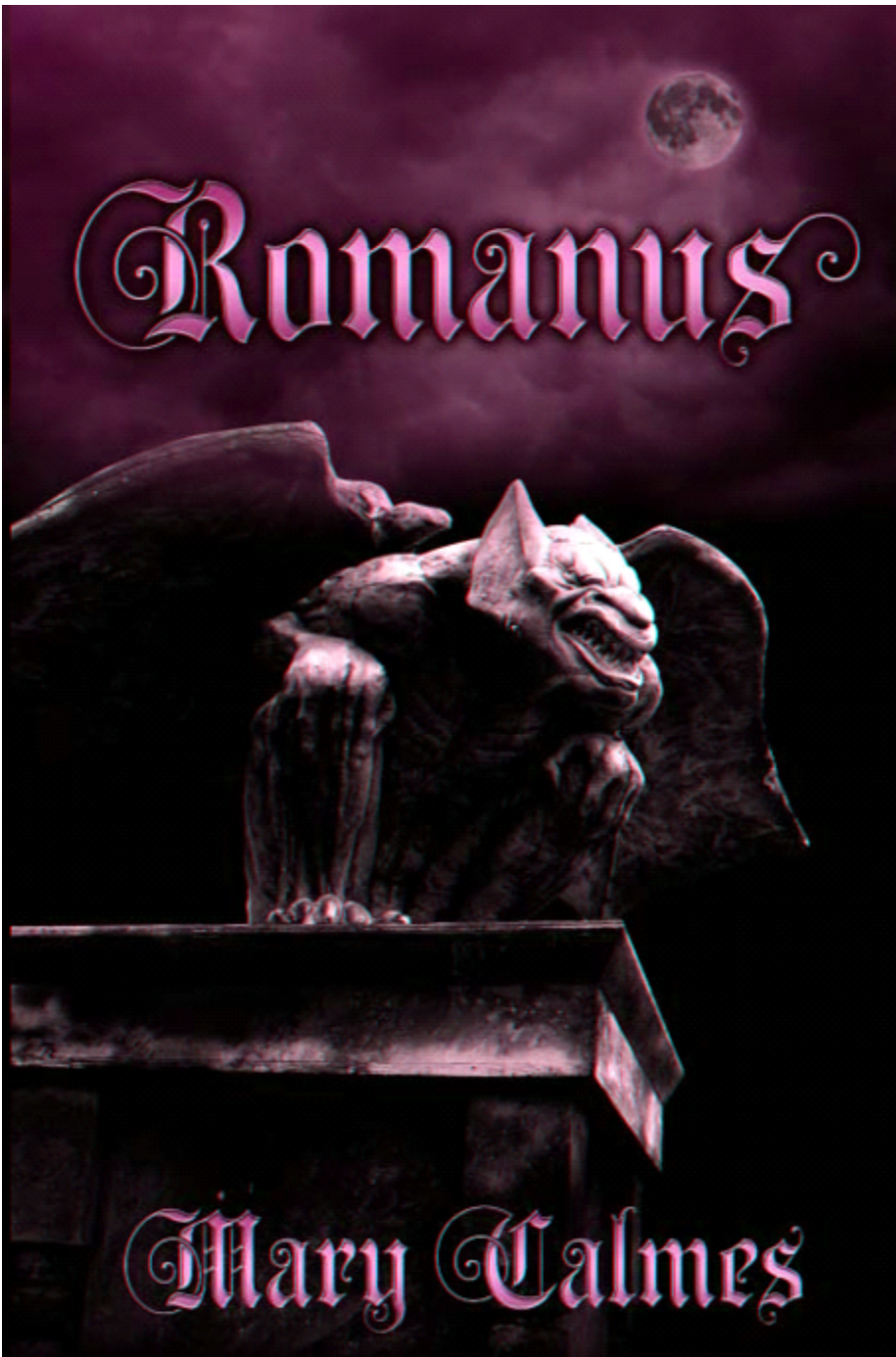
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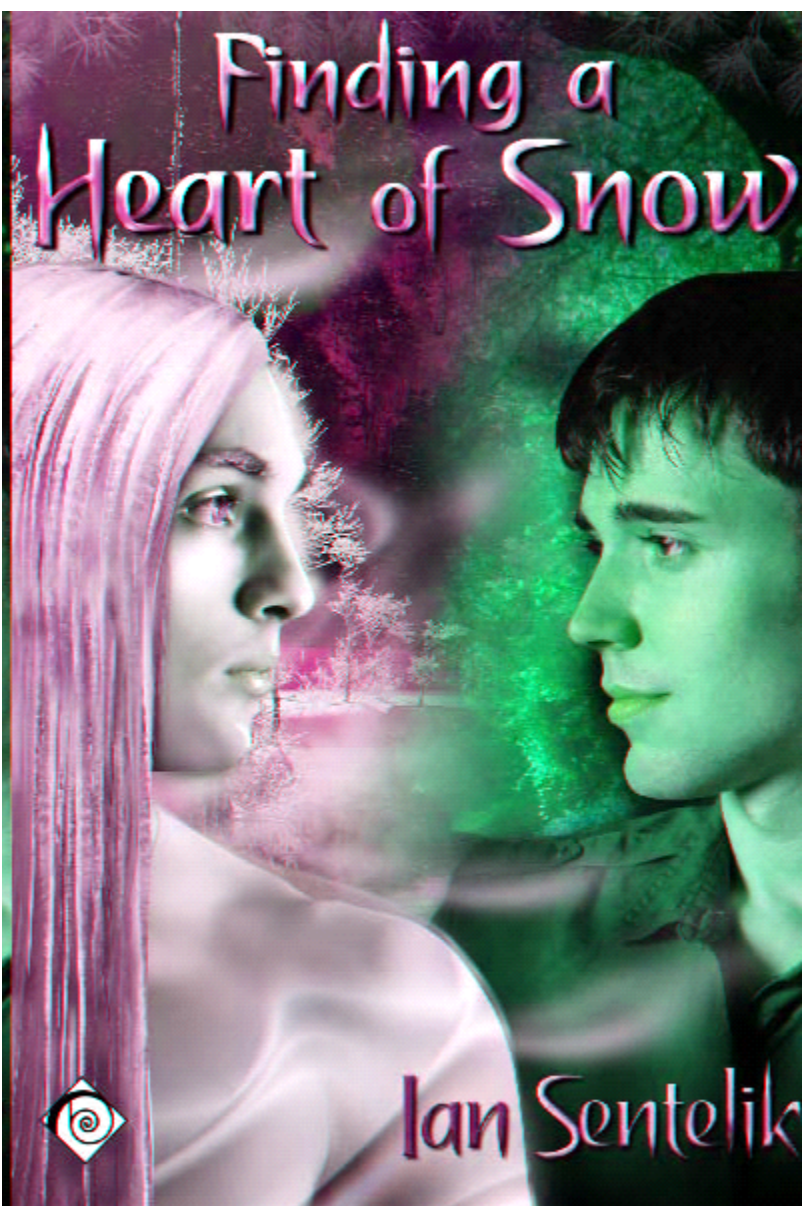
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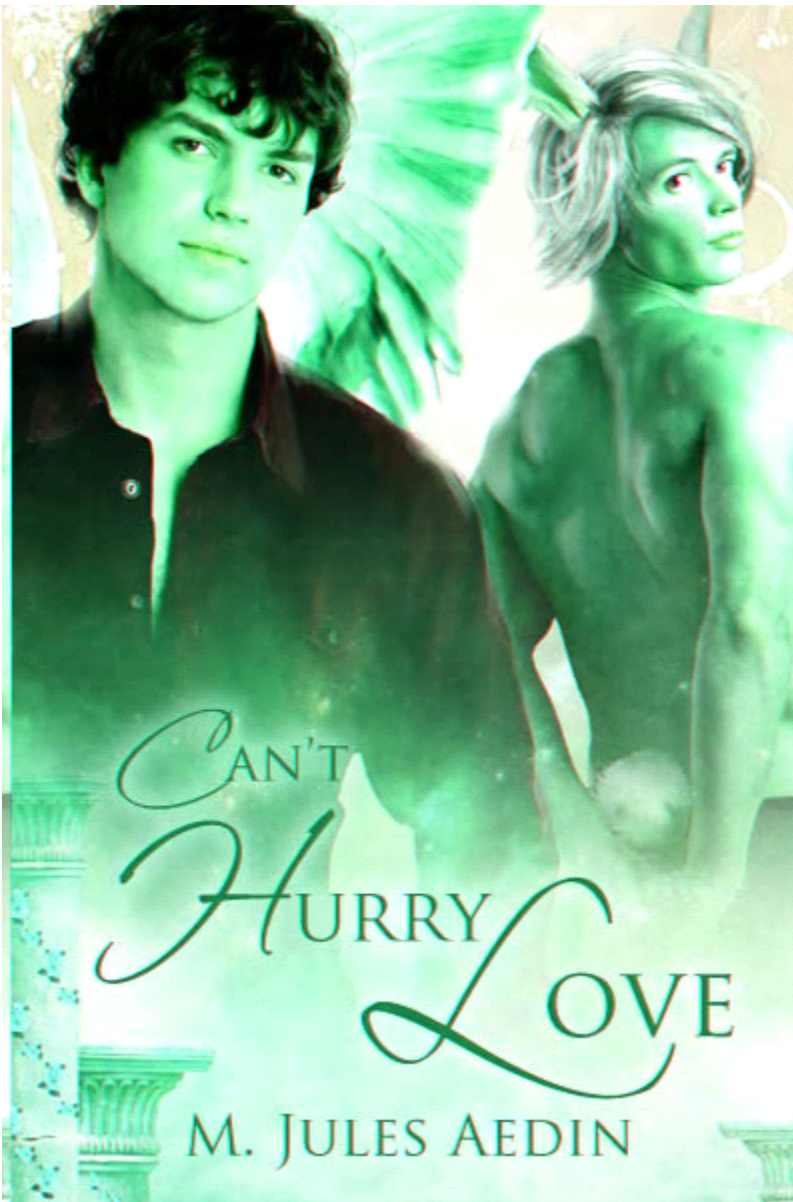


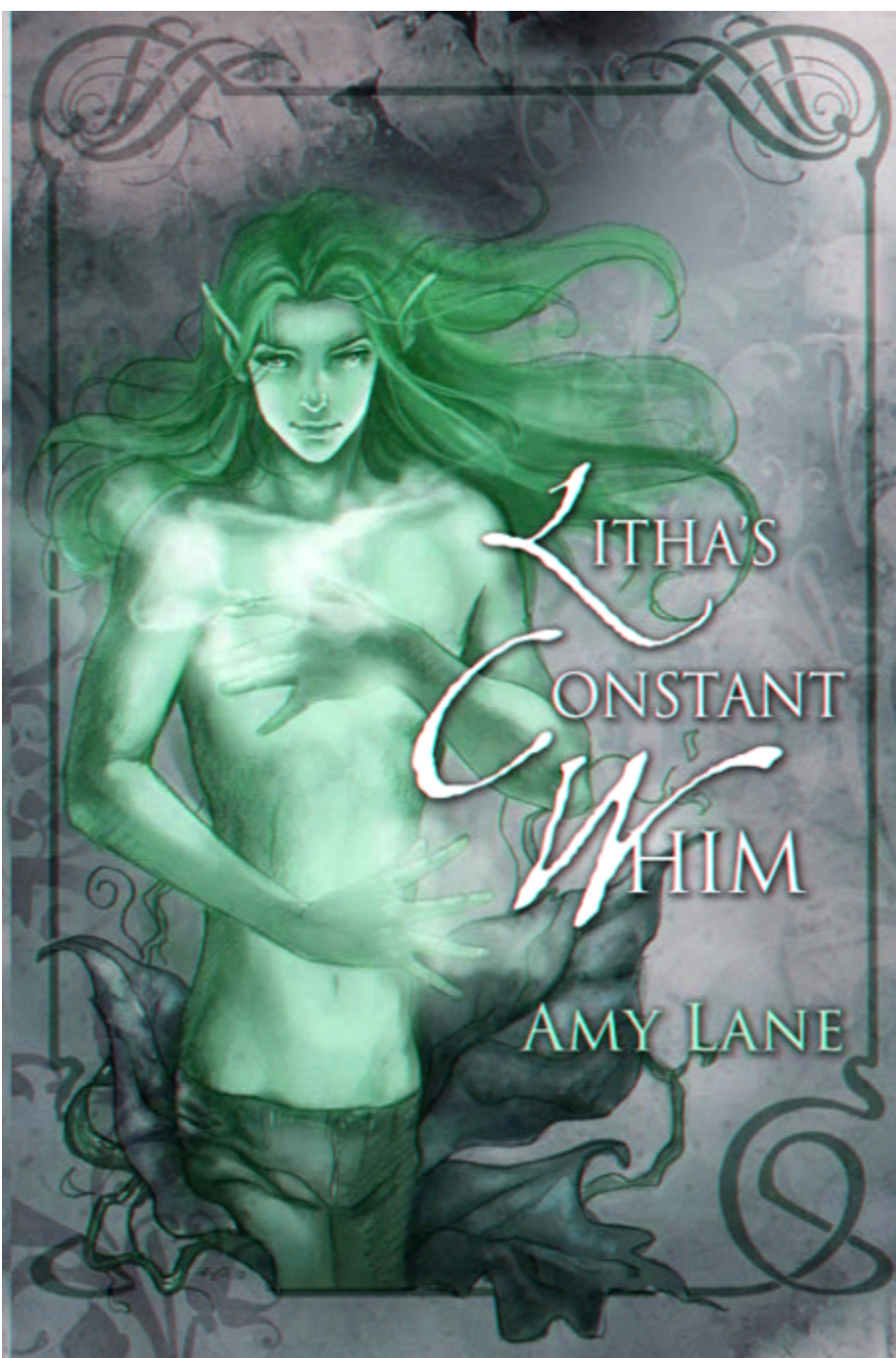


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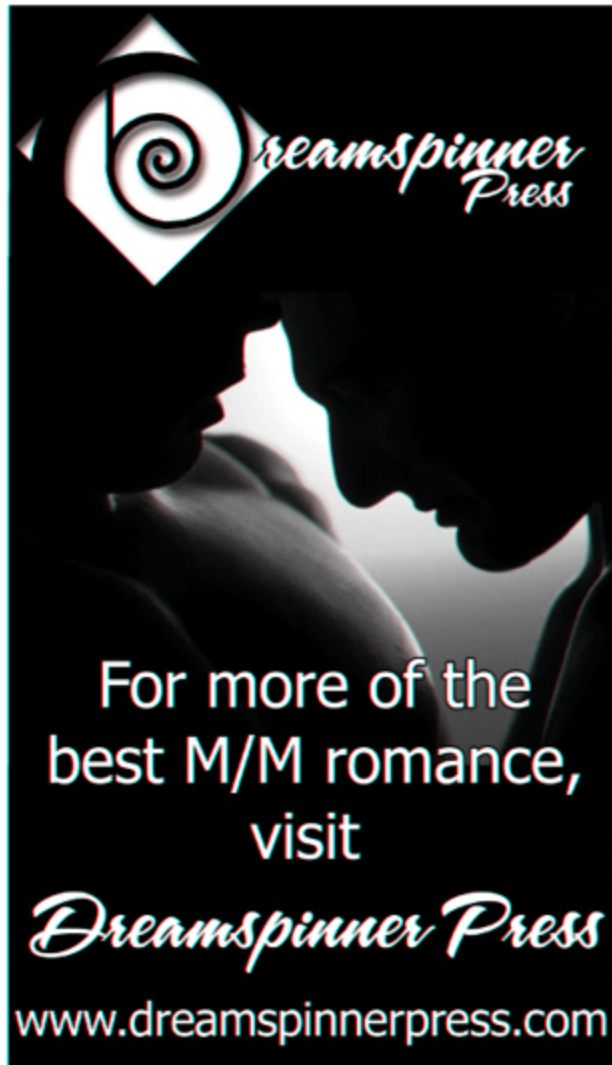






Fantasy Romance from DREAMSPINNER PRESS

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>



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Published by

Dreamspinner Press

4760 Preston Road

Suite 244-149

Frisco, TX 75034

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Released in the United States of America July 2010

eBook Edition

eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-572-2